CANTZ

Sigmar Polke

Three Lies of Painting

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The Three Lies of Painting

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"Why the anger in your eyes?
Have I done you some good turn?"

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"Why the anger in your eyes?
Have I done you some good turn?"

Preface

We don't need paintings,
we don't need painters and
we don't need artists.
...
Take it with a grain of salt!

Only a few lines separate these two remarks cited from an interview with Sigmar Polke. With apparent ease he switches from a radical stance to one devoid of all passion. Again and again, the artist irritates his public with role changes of this kind. Polke is a player. Nothing is more alien to him than definitive clarity. He plays with meanings, with words, with categories. He loves alluding to literature, to art history, to history in general; he experiments and provokes with new materials. Polke combines totally different pictorial contents, establishing patterns of meaning that appear absurd at first glance but often reveal more profound relationships. Characterised by irony and clever wit, his art is outstanding and highly significant. Since the 1960s, Polke has exercised an essential influence in the shaping of German art while gaining acclaim through exhibitions and awards both in Germany and abroad. It is therefore a great pleasure for us to be able to honour the artist with the most extensive retrospective of his work ever exhibited.

We are particularly pleased that the exhibition is being shown both in Bonn and – in a somewhat different form – in Berlin, thus not only forging a bridgehead between the old and new capitals but paying tribute to Polke's importance for postwar art and as a commentator on recent history.

This exhibition coincides with the 5th anniversary of the opening of the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn. For the Nationalgalerie Berlin, the exhibition represents the first in a planned series of exhibitions at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart.

First and foremost, we wish to thank Sigmar Polke himself for helping make the exhibition possible. Despite the fears of sceptics, our work with the artist proved to be a convivial, constructive experience characterised by a spirit of friendship.

It goes without saying, however, that an undertaking of this magnitude would have been inconceivable without the support and cooperation of many national and

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Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle
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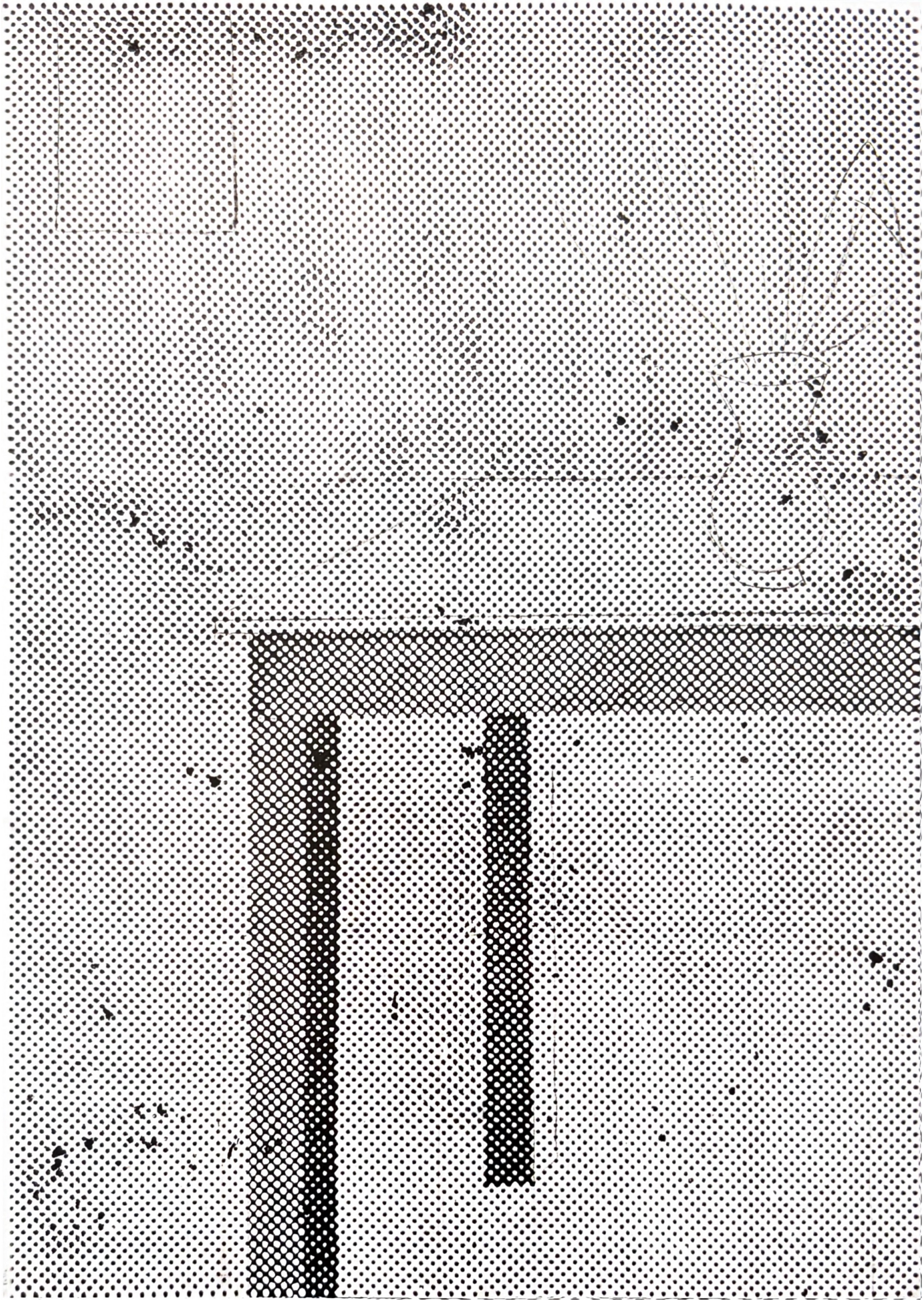


MARTIN HENTSCHEL

Solve et Coagula
On Sigmar Polke's Work

At this time he found everywhere objects already known to him but marvellously mingled and mated, and strange vicissitudes often arose within him. Soon he became aware of the inter-relation of all things, of conjunctions, of coincidences. Ere long he saw nothing singly.

Novalis, *The Disciples at Saïs*

1. 'German Pop' and Fluxus: A New Era Begins in Düsseldorf

1 Sigmar Polke in front of the shop window at the Kaiserstraße exhibition, 1963

The harbingers of the new era were the Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter and the moment came in spring 1963 with their decision to put on their own exhibition. Polke reconnoitred an empty butcher's shop in Kaiserstraße 31A in Düsseldorf (illus. 1). The location was familiar: diagonally opposite it was Galerie 22 which, under the direction of Jean-Pierre Wilhelm, had been the venue in May 1960 for Germany's first sight of the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. The spring board for the four up and coming young artists was the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf where they had met in 1961 as students of Karl-Otto Götz. Polke had already completed an earlier trial semester with Gerhard Hoehme, and was later to study with him again.

In order to leave the public in no doubt as to the serious artistic intent behind the exhibition, the participants stated in no uncertain terms that this event was not to be 'commercial in nature but purely demonstrative.'[1] At the same time this was a strategy designed to preclude commercial failure. The artists' feel for the signs of the time is evident from the wording on the invitations to what was to become a legendary exhibition. These were decorated with a band revealing the participants' awareness of the latest currents in the art world, then emerging in New York and Paris: POP ART, JUNK CULTURE, NOUVEAU REALISME, COMMON OBJECT PAINTING, NEO DADA, NEW VULGARISMUS, ANTIKUNST, KNOW-NOTHING-GENRE. The artists were well informed, above all through the Swiss journal *Art International*, which, as early as the beginning of 1962, had published an article by Max Kozloff with the title: "'Pop' Culture, Metaphysical Disgust and the New Vulgarians."[2]

However, it was the January 1963 edition of *Art International* – devoted almost entirely to Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme – that was to create the greatest impact. Barbara Rose's major article in this edition, 'Dada then and now', was preceded by

1 Press release to the *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*; see Harten 1986, p. 15, and Hentschel 1991, pp. 56f.
2 *Art International*, 6 (1962), pp. 34 – 36

Kurt Schwitters' renowned collage, *For Käte,* 1947, now regarded as Pop Art *avant la lettre*[3]: with its ironic high spirits this work was bound to have been of interest to Polke (illus. 2). As it happens, the same page also bears a motto with the very words that appeared on the invitations to the Kaiserstraße exhibition, right down to the bald 'Know-nothing-genre.' Rose's text, now soberly perspicacious, now emphatic in tone, takes the once derogatory designation Neo-Dada and uses it as a foil to define and turn the spotlight on the new Pop Art movement, convincingly demonstrating to the journal's young German readers that something radically new was happening on the other side of the Atlantic. The press release for the exhibition, signed on behalf of all the participants by Gerhard Richter, was worded accordingly: "The value of the exhibition derives from the themes of the works on show. For the first time in Germany, these will include works that may be described as Pop Art, Imperialist or Capitalist Realism, New Sobriety, Naturalism, German Pop and the like. Pop Art recognises the modern mass media as a genuine cultural phenomenon and draws, with artifice, on the attributes, formulations and contents of the modern mass media for its own artistic expression. Thus it is changing the face of modern painting, heralding an aesthetic revolution." The vocabulary used was both drastic and uninhibited. The writers were at pains to state that Pop Art was "not an American import," declaring that on the contrary it was a matter of the "independent and organic" growth of art in Germany.[4]

It is no longer possible to say for certain which works Polke showed at the exhibition. Yvonne Friedrichs' review referred to Polke's work: "The Silesian Sigmar Polke, born 1941, goes back to 'a child's earliest efforts at painting' in his 'work on' existing magazine and advertising pictures. Thus the printed picture of a pretty model (from a fashion magazine) is blurred with turpentine and becomes a 'Madonna.' Details of grisly pictures from crime stories are tellingly reproduced."[5]

A comparison of Polke's work with that of Gerhard Richter at the time points up clear differences between the two. Richter's *Erschießung* [Shooting] and *Party* (illus. 3) – both from 1962 and included in the Kaiserstraße exhibition – are entirely socio-critical: thus the 'party' guests, typical symbols of the emerging affluent society, are wounded by aggressive cuts into the canvas. Red paint drips like blood from the hero's mouth and from where the cuts have been sewn together again. Here Richter is taking Lucio Fontana's method (employed by the latter to extend the picture in terms of an over-arching concept of space) and using it 'against' the motif. From the outset, any such palpable moral undertone had no place in Polke's work. His two earliest surviving works, *Bierseidel* [Beer Mug] and *Engel* [Angels: illus. 4], both from 1962, already point unmistakably towards that sense of ironic distance which was soon to emerge as central to Polke's work.

There is also irony in the term 'Capitalist Realism,' the only label still shared by these artists today. As it became increasingly evident over the years that art critics

2 Kurt Schwitters, *For Käte*, 1947. Private collection

3 Gerhard Richter, *Party*, 1962. Collection of Frieder Burda

4 *Engel*, 1962. Karin Polke

3 See, amongst others, Lippard 1966, p. 11

4 Mention need only be made here in passing of the fact that British Pop Art was of course much earlier off the mark than American Pop Art, since at the time, international art criticism focused exclusively on the USA as the relevant edition of Art International amply demonstrates.

5 Rheinische Post, May 16, 1963

5 *Festum Festorum Fluxus*, Staatl. Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, 2/3 February 1963

were using the term as a descriptor of style, the artists involved sought to distance themselves from it. Yet, as a term, 'Capitalist Realism' does reflect the tenor of picture production at the time, for as the converse of 'Socialist Realism,' it takes the clichés of everyday life and casts them in a critical rather than in a heroic light; it displays an ironically ambivalent attitude to the products of the everyday world as opposed to their apotheosis in Pop Art; and not least, it opposes the abstract art of the fifties.

In fact this last point should not be underestimated, for as Pop Art was emerging so, too, did another movement that was rubbing just as strongly the wrong way against *peinture*, supposedly petrified in its own smugness, and against the dogma of subjectivity and the self-conscious artistic ego: this movement was Fluxus. As late as 1959, on the occasion of *documenta II* in Kassel, abstract art was widely hailed as a 'world language,'[6] because it was genuinely seen as the counterpart to the newly-won freedoms of the economic miracle and democracy.[7] It is true, there were already critical voices from within the ranks, but these were isolated as yet. Werner Haftmann who rather tersely commented in the *documenta* catalogue that "art has become abstract" warned at the same time against the "dangers of perversion": he saw "a language that owes its existence to the strength of artists' individuality" as being threatened by the hoards climbing on the band-wagon: "And so it is, that even now, a means of expression that has taken so much commitment, suffering and life's blood to achieve, is already turning either into cosily lyrical or pompous 'Biedermeierei': the Tachiste Professor or the wolf in sheep's clothing."[8]

Like Pop Art, so too Fluxus was formulated by its relationship to concrete reality, which in itself has nothing to do with the heights of lyrical abstraction; of the two, Fluxus was much more radical in tone. On 9th June 1962, the Lithuanian-American George Maciunas, regarded now as the founding spirit of Fluxus, held a lecture in the Galerie Parnaß in Wuppertal called 'Neo-Dada in the United States.' In this he made a statement that signalled verbally the changing paradigms that had so far found expression in Actions, in musical Events in Germany and in Happenings in the USA: "In order to establish closer contact with reality, the art-nihilist either produces anti-art or nothing – just banalities."[9] In Maciunas' view: "Eating noises are more concrete than the trained singing voice," a blow from a hammer, a kick against the piano are more concrete than the notes that can be produced by playing the piano's keys: contentions that were then actively lived out in Fluxus-Events.

On 16th June 1962 the Düsseldorf Kammerspiele was the venue for the Fluxus-Event 'Neo-Dada in Music' and a little over six months later, on 2nd and 3rd February 1963, the same protagonists met in the Kunstakademie for the large-scale *Festum Festorum Fluxus* (illus. 5). Amongst others the participants included Tomas Schmit, Emmett Williams, Arthur Köpcke, Nam June Paik, Daniel Spoerri, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys and George Maciunas: major players in the dissemination of Fluxus. The event took place under the auspices of

6 See Glozer 1981, pp. 172ff.
7 See Hermand 1978, pp. 149ff.
8 Haftmann 1959, p. 18
9 Baltzer, Biermann 1980, p. 196

Beuys in his capacity as professor at the Kunstakademie and he designated this "instrumental theatre" as it was called in the pre-publicity as a "colloquium."

There can be no doubt that this event was deeply disturbing to our 'Capitalist Realists': for the students studying under Karl-Otto Götz it must have seemed like one provocation after the other, questioning the academic teaching they were receiving.[10] Looking back, Polke made the comment that "Fluxus was very important, as was Dada,"[11] and on another occasion recalled the major exhibition held in Düsseldorf in 1958 honouring the Dada movement.[12] Dieter Hülsmanns, who conducted a conversation with Polke in his studio in 1966, concluded that "When he [...] was confronted in 1963 with a different kind of artistic discourse, he was so impressed that it was hard for him to go on with what he had thought and done so far."[13]

The term Neo-Dada was applied equally to Fluxus and Pop Art at the time, and with good reason too. In the context of the Pop Art debate instigated by the journal *das kunstwerk* in April 1964, the art critic Franz Roh posed the question as to whether "this is not a kind of Neo-Dada which says that you can use the most banal, everyday means to give voice to all-too fathomable humour?"[14] And indeed Pop Art and Dada are linked by humour, the way they relish banalities, life in the big city and the advertising slogans that go with this. The links between Fluxus and Dada go even deeper. Maciunas took the lexical meaning of the word 'Fluxus' as his starting point: "A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part."[15] This in itself brings to mind Hans Arp's description of Dadaist simultaneous poetry: it "comes directly from the poet's bowels or other organs."[16] The provocative tumult which the Dadaists released in their soirées, was echoed in the 'parallel-performances' of Fluxus, where different actors simultaneously performed diverse actions, bordering on nonsense.

Like Dada, Fluxus works with chance; both movements make much of art willingly subsumed in life and deny the authorial subjectivity of the artist. And lastly, along with Pop Art, they reject traditional painting; its supposed bloodlessness is the basis for their declared preference for the trivial and the banal. The similarity is no coincidence. Although it is true that Dada had already severely curtailed the validity of a whole range of paradigms – be it artistic autonomy, originality, continuity, subjectivity or the divisions between high and popular culture – the conservative atmosphere of the post-war years and its "stuffy culture of repression"[17] virtually reinstated these notions in their entirety. This was what led in the early sixties to the feeling of a "second zero hour"[18] that made it possible to dare a renewed attack on art as an institution.

2. Reconnoitring the Living Room – Niches in the Advertising World

The Fluxus shower which descended on Düsseldorf in 1963 fell on fertile ground as far as Sigmar Polke was concerned. It perfectly met his own anarchic spirit and humour, which may perhaps best be described by the following anecdote.

10 Campbell (1996) has also recently taken this view
11 Parkett, no. 26 (1990), p. 7
12 In conversation with the author on February 21, 1997. (Dada-Dokumente einer Bewegung, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen/Kunsthalle Düsseldorf 1958)
13 Hülsmanns 1966
14 *das kunstwerk*, 10/XVII, April 1964, p. 31
15 George Maciunas, Manifest, Sonderdruck Fluxus 1963, repr. in: Becker, Vostell 1965, p. 203
16 Quoted in Richter 1973, p. 28
17 Heubach 1986, p. 113
18 Belting 1989, p. 20

The art dealer Alfred Schmela and his wife had just moved into a new flat in Luegplatz. His widow later described the situation: "The move was easy because we had very little. Alfred couldn't stand furniture because it spoilt walls that could be used for art. I had just inherited a large cupboard, which we pushed from one room to the next, but it was always getting in the way of the art. [...] Besides this, all I had was one little wardrobe. Polke visited us and said 'Is that all you've got?' And with that, he painted me a matching wardrobe with two keyholes."[19]

The facts are significant: a thumb-nail sketch of Polke's perceptive reaction to any given situation, here to the competition between art and furniture. The painting *Schrank*, 1963, [Wardrobe: see p. 14] presented a confident, humorous solution in the sense that the work appears to mediate between the two contradictory interests: but in reality both demands are ironically sold short. On the one hand, the work seems to be a *trompe l'œil*, mimicking reality with its shiny surface and suggestion of slightly open door and keyholes. On the other hand this impression is immediately contradicted insofar as the minimal depths of the picture carrier undeniably induces a response whereby the modus of the painting becomes its meaning.

Goethes Werke, [Goethe's Works] also from 1963 [see p. 15], are similarly ambiguous – not that anyone could seriously doubt that this is an easel painting; yet the format and the plasticity of the books' spines are somehow roguishly insistent on being viewed as real books: an ironic comment on the mahogany veneer 'mock culture' that took such firm hold of West German furnishings in the fifties before being contained in the showrooms of the furniture industry.

Uwe Japp defines the context of irony as follows: "Irony always involves a self and another party, which present as a unit. This unity is a pretend unity, a unity as though."[20] Although irony is linguistic in origin, it also proves to be a visual impulse that may make itself felt in many directions. It is hardly surprising that Polke went into it with some intensity from the outset for irony expresses itself in its 'non-actuality' and was a particularly effective counterbalance to the atmosphere of the late fifties "that were dominated by wasted existentialism emasculated by Christianity, by militant bigotry and by a blinkered terror of the positive, by 'actuality' and 'depths.'"[21]

The materials that Polke chose to work with were similarly oppositional. His use of lacquer, as in the examples already mentioned here, ran counter to the notion of *peinture* for lacquer barely allows of modulation. The dispersion paints that he often used were dismissed as inferior because of their poor light resistance. And lastly his use of printed fabrics was certainly breaching a taboo. If one had to descend into the realms of the everyday world then it was supposedly the artist's job to leave his or her mark on them. In the fifties Willi Baumeister designed curtain materials, Fritz Winter and K. H. Sonderborg created designs for the Göppingen Calico and Leatherette Works.[22] These were in themselves simply attempts by Bauhaus epigones

19 Baum 1989, p. 231
20 Japp 1983, p. 29
21 Heubach 1986, p. 114
22 Borngräber 1986, pp. 358, 361

to revive the violated messianic notion of standardising the taste of an entire society, with their own artistic originality guaranteeing the overall cultural level. The opposite path, where an artist would take on board the commonplace designs of the consumer society hardly seemed viable before the early sixties. It was not compatible with the obsolete, yet still virulent, misconception of the artist creating as out of nothingness[23] and whose initial spark is dependent on the white canvas.

Early Fabric Pictures: Exoticism and Idylls

This must have made it all the more vexing when Polke painted his first fabric picture, *Das Palmen-Bild* [The Palm Painting: see p. 11] in 1964. In the words of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: "The picture carrier is released from its objective, anonymous function [...]."[24] The fabric in question is patterned with a stripe, somewhat reminiscent of wood grain. Polke filled the lower third with a diagonal ochre and white field representing a sand dune. Above this two palm trees bend towards one another. They are only representational to the point of being recognisable. Thus in its own way the painting becomes one with the pattern on the fabric: the 'beautiful lines' of the palm trunks tend to the ornamental and in this sense also tie in with the colours of the fabric. Thus the picture ground becomes pictorial and, as such, brings to mind notions of 'jungle,' and, vice versa, the painting itself merges into the rampantly visual patterning of the fabric. And furthermore the painted elements reveal the concealed exoticism behind the pattern used for this fabric – the exotic, the romantic, the rustic: the moods used in bourgeois interiors to escape the monotony of normality. However, with regard to taste and choice, it is supposedly crucial that these are only drawn on with a level of propriety that precludes any suspicion of kitsch. Polke destroys this tacit agreement by imposing the false scenario of his painting on the pattern of the fabric. Thus the 'pretend unity' peculiar to irony comes into play once more.

A whole range of motifs that Polke embraces in his visual world in the sixties seem like collections of finds from reconnaissance missions in petit bourgeois, German living rooms. And it is not by chance that 'the exotic' crops up so frequently. This is wholly in keeping with the conservatism of any emergant affluent society which first finds expression within the individual members' own four walls. In this context the exotic takes on the role of a projection screen. As yet, foreign travel is beyond the means of most people, so the only thing to do is to create a visual 'idyll' in one's own "interior space"[25] by incorporating some touch of foreignness, fleetingly glimpsed in travel brochures

A number of Polke's works responded to this situation. For example, his *Palmenbild mit Gitter*, 1967 [Palm Painting with Trellis: see p. 168], alludes to the homely trellis as found in petit bourgeois arbours. Instead of roses this one is adorned with one small picture showing a palm tree and the sea. The painting itself is kidney-shaped, echoing the kidney-shaped tables that today seem synonymous with German taste in

23 'Original producing is not dependent on comparable ability, in this sense the original artist can do nothing at a high level.' Baumeister 1947, p. 155

24 Buchloh 1976, p. 143

25 Bernhard 1977, pp. 106f.

6 *Flamingos*, 1966.
Collection of Uli Knecht

the 1950s. And in this sense the *Palmenbild mit Gitter* shows how idyll and exoticism go hand in hand. And again there is the 'pretend unity,' here revealing exoticism and idyll as issuing from one and the same thought process.

Somewhat milder, on the other hand, is the picture *Liebespaar*, 1967 [Lovers: see p. 19], which again takes up the motif of the palm tree – now plus a tender sunset. Yet the couple that give the picture its name are no less clichéd than their alter ego, that place where escapist fantasies collect together. The extensive blank regions on the picture show that both images may be seen as projections: motifs that apparently appear and disappear of their own accord: a fine line comes into sight, develops into shading, reduces and retreats again.

Flamingos, like palm trees, come under the heading 'exotic' and still today – as numerous eponymous nightclubs prove – lend exoticism a tinge of the erotic. Polke's picture *Flamingos,* 1966 (illus. 6), was originally part of his *Vitrinenstück* [Showcase Piece] installation, which will be discussed later here. *Flamingos* was sold separately from the rest of the piece but its original setting states that it was painted "at the command of higher beings": a formula that the artist uses to cast ironic doubt on his own authorship. This may be seen as a self-protection strategy, for the picture plainly laid itself open to accusations of kitsch, going further than any other of the creations that were coming out in the name of Pop Art.

Two years later the flamingo turns into a heron: a thoroughly homey bird. Although it has a straight beak the curve of its neck is distinctly reminiscent of the flamingo. And thus the heron takes the stage as a flamingo assimilated into the (spotless) petit bourgeois interior – albeit with an increased level of kitsch. In *Reiherbild I*, 1968 [Heron Painting I: see p. 108], there is a diagonal trellis in the background which is readily recognisable as the decorative rose trellis. The birds' slender necks are set against the glowing red of the sunset. In *Reiherbild III*, 1968 [see p. 107], the pale disc of the sun is added to the scene. *Reiherbild IV*, 1968 [see p. 111], is dramatically heightened with the evening glow turning into sheet lightning against the night sky, although the sky in the lower half of the picture transforms downwards into some kind of a living room decor. And ultimately there is a furious finale in the shape of *Sonnenuntergang mit Reihern*, 1969 [Sunset with Herons: see p. 110], which brings together all the various allusions in what can only be seen as a farewell to the petit bourgeois world, with the fake leopard skin somehow epitomising this ironic closing hymn.

However, *Reiherbild II*, 1968 [see p. 109], seems to be an interloper here: the consciously dilettante use of paint straight from the tube sits uneasily with the other 'mood pictures.' On the contrary, this work reads much more like a malevolent riposte to the kind of painting perpetrated by those such as George Mathieu who renounced any hint of pentimenti in order not to impair that first rush of artistic inspiration. All this begs the question as to why it is that these pictures do not in fact descend into pure kitsch? Nos I to IV of the series all use beaver cloth as the picture

carrier, a material that is still used today for sheets. If one takes into account the fact that both the motif and the haptic properties of the fabric constitute the picture itself, the result is a thematically discordant configuration of 'pair of herons – sunset – sheet.' In addition to this, the unrefined use of colour runs directly counter to the kind of illusionism necessary for 'genuine' kitsch. For the latter presupposes a viewer who still unquestioningly values technical skill. Polke falls short of any such yardstick at every turn. However hard one may try, in the face of Polke's works it is impossible to feel the "sentimental self-indulgence" and "microcosmic cosiness"[26] that are central to the appreciation of kitsch.

The same may be said of another work from this period, the *Negerplastik*, 1968 [Negro Sculpture: see p. 113]. And it must be said that the patterned fabric support that itself becomes part of the picture could hardly be surpassed in terms of kitsch: an importunate mixture of hares smoking cigarettes, bear cubs playing with yo-yos, fawns bedecked with bells and collars, a fox and a cock keeping cosy company – all motifs from an unrelenting nursery idyll. The scene is, however, seriously disturbed by paint smears and a superimposed, block-like, painted sculpture apparently supported by a pair of scissors.

These examples show Polke's bravura stand against the forced eclectic harmonisation of kitsch. In his work the elements of kitsch are not homogenised: on the contrary, they are 'heterogenised.' And in the process any hankering for the small-scale and the cosy is ironically cast aside. Instead Polke takes the viewer from out of the restrictive realms of 'home-maker mode' into the all-pervasive realms of the grotesque.

The Aestheticisation and Disavowal of the Trivial

It is now time to turn from works addressing the socio-aesthetic context of the German living room to works looking at the wider world.

An early example is the *Doppelporträt Fabiola*, 1965 [Double Portrait of Fabiola: illus. 21]: a typical image from the tabloids of the time, which still take delight in the pleasures and the pains of the upper classes. The blank spaces for a caption made it evident that the picture is based on a printed original. This immediately turns the motif into a pictorial quote. Polke created a double image, using a realistic photographic representation much as Gerhard Richter and James Rosenquist were doing at the time. For the second image he painted a consciously dilettante, free copy. The immaculate features of the regal beauty become positively vulgar: the painting deconstructs the photograph.

In *Liebespaar II,* 1965 [Lovers II: see p. 17], Polke became even more brutish. Again the work is evidently based on a photographic original. The posture of the hands would seem to imply an advertisement for washing-up liquid or hand cream. The figures are portrayed in a style veering between verism and comedy – the way the elegant gentleman's suit is cut off below is only part of this, for while the left side

26 Giesz 1971, pp. 28f., p. 73

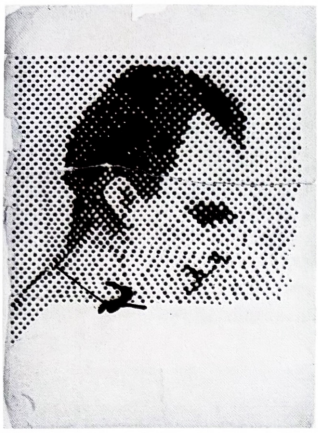
of the work is a misshapen abstract painting, round, coloured splodges dance across the woman's face and décolleté.

In both works Polke used reproductions that anyone could have access to. The way that he handled them points up with the utmost clarity the difference between these and comparable Pop Art works. Looking back, Arthur C. Danto put it as follows: "Warhol recognised that nothing an artist could do was going to reveal anything more of what art was searching for than reality already was doing. Therefore what mattered was to show things as they were: without shadow, perspective, chiaroscuro, facture or colour."[27] This is certainly an exaggeration as far as means of representation are concerned, and yet it does go to the heart of Warhol's method, which is most evident in his use of series. As early as 1962, the Ferrus Gallery exhibition which included his 32 images of tins of Campbell's soup showed, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh put it, that Warhol was destroying the status of the picture as "an individual artistic item by putting the same image – and price – on all his pictures, virtually turning them into products."[28] In Polke's case, on the other hand, the picture always retains its status as an individual entity – and this applies equally to his screen dot pictures as will be seen later. In addition to this, the examples here show that Polke responded consciously to each different original before working out his treatment of it. And the treatments that he decides upon are almost invariably subversive, running counter to the theme of the original.

Whereas in Pop Art the higher reaches of art are trivialised while the trivial is aestheticised,[29] in Polke's work the trivial is both aestheticised and disavowed at one and the same time. This disavowal – and that includes herons and palms – is the outcome of ironic distance. Even one of the few works where commercial items are thematised is patently different to Pop Art, as in the picture *Kekse*, 1964 [Biscuits: see p. 12]. Although this work comes close to Pop Art the subject matter itself is so comparatively low key that it has little to do with advertising images. The biscuits are simply floating aimlessly around in the picture space. As in the picture *Plastikwannen*, 1964 [Plastic Tubs: see p. 20] the 'empty' picture ground is used to neutralise, from the outset, any hints of advertising that might be incorporated into the whole. In this sense, rather than pointing to the saturated consumerism of the sixties, the motif has much more to do with the still gaping gaps in the basics of everyday life in Germany in the fifties.[30]

The same applies to the *Wurstesser*, 1963 [The Sausage Eater: see p. 23]. The theme is taken directly from fairgrounds and the decorations on the sausage stands.[31] A string of sausages turns into an ornamental shape which can be read in two ways: either a runner waving some sausages or kind of squid. Having once discovered these figures the viewer's perception slides between them and the plain string of sausages – as though between the picture space and the picture surface: a process of constant self-renewal. The sausage eater himself seems rather like an accessory to his own hallucination. The shift between an ornamental string of

27 Danto 1992
28 Buchloh 1989, p. 52
29 See Hofmann 1978, pp. 501f.
30 Wildt 1994
31 As related by Polke in conversation with the author on August 13, 1987



7 *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)*, 1963. Private collection

sausages and a monstrous figure is a typical characteristic of grotesque ornament: "Ornament mode and picture mode are the reality. Inseparable and mutually invigorating, balancing and floating, they create a kind of irony, which is ultimately a game with the possibilities of art, in fact with art itself."[32] And this is the same sense in which Polke's *Wurstesser* goes beyond the reality of the fast-food stand and enters into the realm of the grotesque, where fantasy roams free, detached from any serious reality.

This mixture of grotesque and comic provides another sighting of that same anarchic attitude already evident in Polke's 'anti-thematic,' subversive interventions in the field of German domestic life and which will continue to be an issue throughout this discussion of his work. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin: "The moment of laughter, the carnivalesque world view that is at the basis of the grotesque, destroys narrow-minded seriousness as well as any claims for the timeless significance and immutability of notions of necessity."[33] In its grotesque heightening of an everyday object the *Wurstesser* introduces the spirit of Fluxus into painting more than any other of Polke's works from the sixties. The celebration of the trivial, with Fluxus taking up where Dada left off, seems all the more radical in the *Wurstesser* in that the work itself takes the form of a traditional easel painting.

3. Rasters and Dots

In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Rorty brings out the difference between those engaged in metaphysics and those engaged in irony. In agreement with Sartre he describes the position of the ironist as "meta-stable." This complements and to a certain extent confirms Bakhtin's "carnivalesque world view." In Rorty's words, ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."[34]

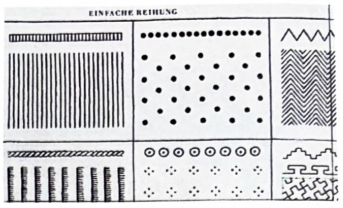
Nothing describes this awareness more aptly than Polke's handling of his raster or Benday dot pictures. The raster, as used by Polke, corresponds from the outset to the notion of contingency, because it is structurally metamorphic. The reality which emerges from the raster is in itself fragile, in a constant state of transition, constantly dissolving and reforming as a contingent, vibrant configuration of dots.

How does this metamorphic structure come into being? Let us examine the *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)*, 1963 [Raster Drawing (Lee Harvey Oswald), illus. 7], where it is possible to see how the raster was made. The paper was first covered with the finest of even, horizontal lines. Then dots were stamped freehand along these. This was done using the rubber on the end of a pencil. The number of dots was determined by the original. Today Polke uses a slide projector for this process, but in the early days he used a magnifying glass to count the number of dots.[35] After that the dots were linked together so that gradually the motif emerged. The rather rudimentary nature of the process in this work throws all the more light on the circumstances of Polke's raster pictures.

32 Bauer 1962, p. 21
33 Bakhtin 1969, p. 28
34 Rorty 1989, pp. 73f.
35 See Hofmeister 1995, p. 65

Degrees of Pictorial Reality

Firstly, it is clear that any illustrative function the raster may have is in fact secondary to its role as a non-representational ornament. Wolfgang von Wersin includes it as such, exemplifying the use of simple rows, in his morphology of ornament (illus. 8). As a repeat pattern it easily stands up as a 'genuine' form of ornament. This very interplay gives rise to the picture *Vase II*, 1965 [see p. 29], where a three-dotted beaver cloth is both ground and motif.



8 From Wolfgang von Wersin, *Das elementare Ornament und seine Gesetzlichkeit.* Ravensburg, 1940

This basis in ornament then makes it possible for individual dots to subsequently break free from their ordinates and even to play around just wherever they like.

Secondly, the arrangement of dots represents the mechanical grid of the printed image. In black and white printing the raster is used for halftone printing with relatively soft transitions between the lighter and the darker tones. The raster block that is produced in the photographic process breaks the tone values into individual, printable elements: tiny dots, which by their density determine the form of the motif and which merge in the eye of the beholder into a coherent picture. In the case of newspapers, a coarse grid size is used to accommodate the consistency of the newsprint itself and in fact most of the motifs assimilated by Polke in his pictures are taken from newspapers.

But when these are magnified perception shifts. Under normal circumstances the viewer's perception is concentrated on the subject matter: "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see. In short, the referent adheres."[36] However, the dominance of the referent which withstands the photographic printing process yields under the transformation effected by the raster picture to the dominance of its own mode of representation, namely the raster itself. This now takes over the position of referent: in itself now first and foremost motif, wholly at one with what it is representing.

Thirdly, it is evident that in *Rasterzeichnung (Lee Harvey Oswald)* within the grid itself there are certain irregularities. Not simply that the dots peter out at the right hand edge of the picture or that they are distorted in the lower portion of the face: above all the patch with a line leading round to the nape of the neck obstinately refuses to give way to the process of transformation; for it is clearly not representational as such. Thus, as the secret link between printed photographic original and reproductive representation is dissolved, so too, and to the same degree, the productive modality of painting looms into sight. For, as Benedetto Varchi declared during the Paragone debates in 16th century Florence, painting makes such things "appear, as are not."[37] Thus in this image two modalities intersect with each other, reproductive as in the printed photograph and productive as in the act of painting. Thus pictorial reality becomes a theme in its own right. Printed images in newspapers prey heavily on the status of photography, which derives from photography's apparent objectivity and which in turn leads to its ubiquitous use in reportage, in photo-finishes, as evidence in the law courts and

36 Barthes 1984, p. 6
37 Quoted in Bätschmann 1984, p. 87

9 *Freundinnen*, 1966.
Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart

10 Cover, *Frankfurter Illustrierte*, May 16, 1959

as a scientific tool. It is only very recently that this status has been weakened by the development of digital photography whereby even amateur photographers can already 'create' pictures just however they want. Yet news journals and advertising continue to survive because photography, like no other medium "satisfies [society's] demand for realism and legibility."[38] Roland Barthes saw the essence of photography in its confirmation of reality, in its "that's how it was." And in this a decisive part is played by contingency and chance, which elude the conscious process of choice and control inherent in photography. Barthes called this the "punctum" of photography.[39] In fact, Benjamin had already pre-empted Barthes' main point: "No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject [...]."[40]

Shimmering Images

How then do Polke's raster pictures interpret photographic reality as printed in newspapers and journals? Much of the answer may be found in his multi-coloured raster pictures, such as *Freundinnen*, 1965/66 [Girlfriends: illus. 9]. The original is by no means an image of friendship: it is obviously promoting the latest in swimwear, as may be seen from an issue of the *Frankfurter Illustrierte* from 1959 (illus. 10) – the fashions are different but the pose is strikingly similar. As in *Doppelporträt Fabiola* the 'empty' areas below the image and to the right show that this is a pictorial quotation. Using a perforated metal 'stencil' and a spray-gun Polke applied several monochrome grids on top of and next to each other, creating a pictorial effect that seems to vibrate, and holds its own as such against the actual subject matter from the very first moment of viewing.

Technical colour reproduction also uses different rasters for each individual colour. In order to create a coherent printed image, faithful to the original colour, the angling of the individual rasters is crucial if unwanted moiré effects are to be avoided. The very effect that printers are at pains to avoid, is extensively exploited by Polke. Most of the picture surface shows moiré effects. The oscillations that these set up in the viewer's eye are the consequence of none of the grids having been positioned 'correctly.' When these coloured grids extend beyond the hand-painted motifs – particularly when viewed neither too closely nor from too far away – then the whole visual effect is unfocused and chromatic. It is as though the entire image were coming away from the picture carrier and moving in constantly changing, non-locatable zones. At the same time, both subject matter and picture surface are flooded by a strange kind of translucency.

Georges Seurat was of course the first to exploit this effect in his chromo-luminarism, where from the middle distance "the entire surface pulsates with colour and a shimmering atmospheric veil seems to hover over the picture."[41] Seurat's

38 Bourdieu 1990
39 Barthes 1984, p. 27
40 Benjamin 1979, p. 243
41 Homer 1964, p. 173

colour system is intended to reproduce the luminosity of coloured light by using particular combinations of coloured pigments and is based on the complex interplay of local colour with all its nuances, white mixes and complementary colours.[42]

In Polke's case, however, each colour is restricted to one tone only; and in any case there are not the same kind of simultaneous contrasts as in Seurat's work because the coloured grid is generally interspersed with the white of the picture ground. Nevertheless, here too the visual impression is determined by exactly those 'incomplete' colour mixes that occur albeit in a different form in Seurat's works. And again, as in Seurat's work, the overall effect changes radically according to the viewing distance.

If viewers try to focus on the picture for more than a certain length of time, they find their eyes no longer able to adapt to the image. Thus the perception of these works is entering an area that also concerns Op Art – and this applies equally to the non-coloured raster pictures. However, while Op Art simply provokes the eye as a visual organ, in Polke's work the eye is always treated as a sense organ. The shimmering effect that greets the viewer in Polke's raster pictures never obscures the fact that the raster is primarily a mediating structure and by no means purely visual.

11 *Berliner (Bäckerblume)*, 1965. Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe – Garnatz Collection

12 Imprint for the trade journal *Bäckerblume*, circa 1963

Decomposition and Recomposition

Raster pictures open up a whole range of associations that are not confined to printing techniques alone but which relate in much broader terms to technical pictures *per se*. Polke saw this early on: "And I like the way that the dots in a magnified picture swim and move about. The way that motifs change from recognisable to unrecognisable, the undecided, ambiguous nature of the situation, the way it remains open. [...] Lots of dots vibrating, resonating, blurring, re-emerging, thoughts of radio signals, radio pictures and television come to mind."[43]

Nothing is so effective as raster pictures when it comes to destroying the naive acceptance of technical pictures as depicting "things from the world on a flat surface" that is to say, as a representation of "the world itself."[44] For raster pictures present the world of images as a world that is both dissolving and in need of reconstruction on the part of the viewer.

They reveal, in the terminology of Vilém Flusser, the "mechanical programme" used to create technical images, above all in photography. This "programme" is "discourse recoded as symbolic facts": theories translated into facts which serve to "magically programme society's behaviour in the interest of the machine."[45] The last stage of this coding takes place via the transmitters "which impregnate photography with the meaning that will determine its reception."[46]

In the fifties Günther Anders was already judging the technical media in this light: "What can be said of the news is even more relevant when it comes to the pro-

42 See ibid., pp. 133ff.
43 Hülsmanns 1966
44 Flusser 1983, pp. 30f.
45 Ibid., p. 32/34
46 Ibid., p. 38, see also Buchloh 1976, p. 142

13 *BZ am Mittag*, 1965.
Städtisches Museum Abteiberg
Mönchengladbach

14 Original used for *BZ am Mittag*

grammes themselves, namely that it makes us unfree, because we are only shown things from elsewhere in an already established, prepared, pre-decided ready-made version: there is no place for our own judgement and this all the more so in the sense that we are unable to resist simply accepting, as reality, the judgements placed before us."[47]

Polke's raster pictures, on the other hand, work at the deconstruction of this prepared, pre-decided world view. It seems in many ways that Polke dissects the smooth outer surface of these images into their constituent parts simply in order to rebuild them in a new confrontational, subversive form. Thus there is a dialectical process of decomposition and modified recomposition. These opposed forces then result in pictures that are anything but smooth, where once solid surfaces dissolve into porosity.

Phantasmagoria

In *Tisch*, 1963, [Table, see p. 30], made using a metal stencil, the subject matter stands out clearly from the dot pattern. This work is not based on any particular original. This in itself leads to various inconsistencies, for example, on the one hand the grid of dots functions as 'shadow' whereas when it comes to the vase on the table it seems to be defining different areas of the image – once again emphasising the creative role of painting.

In the case of *Berliner*, 1965 [Doughnuts: illus. 11], the image of the baker is undoubtedly taken from the journal *Bäckerblume* (illus. 12). With the exception of the neck this is a faithful transcription, dot by dot. On the other hand the outlines of the baker's jacket are free invention, that is, created using a dot pattern which is itself a fabrication. Polke takes this process a stage further in the singular work *BZ am Mittag*, 1965 (illus. 13). In this case the original is already a simulacrum, namely a 'newspaper' printed in very limited numbers for a wedding, purveying a mixture of gossip and facts about the bridal couple (illus. 14).[48] Gently tongue-in-cheek, all the various items became equally credible because they were 'in the paper.' The wedding was in 1911. In 1965 Polke was commissioned to re-do the title page of the paper for the widow's 75th birthday. Although Polke was by now already using a spray gun, on this occasion he resorted to the earlier method and, albeit with the metal stencil, created the image dot by dot with a round rubber stamp.

The result is highly ornamental. However, it is particularly notable that Polke has developed the whole picture from a raster for which there was never an original. In addition, he covers the whole picture surface while the actual cover picture was much more limited in its scope. Thus this raster is not imitating a newspaper raster; it is much more of a shorthand indication of the notion 'newspaper.' Applied to the motif in question, it ultimately becomes a vehicle for imaginative memory. The full extent of the reach of this method may be seen in the picture *Großer Kopf*, 1966 [Large Head: see p. 35], for what may be read here as a 'head' is in fact no more

47 Anders 1956/1985, p. 163

48 With grateful thanks to Frau Koch of Wuppertal for generously supplying a photocopy of the wedding paper.

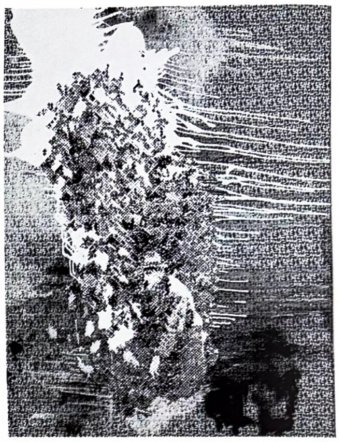
than the multiple superimposition of differently coloured dot patterns in various sizes. Thus the formation of the image is purely phantasmagoric without reference to any printed original.

This ambivalence, showing 'what is not there' and yet using the processes of reproduction comes up again in *Pasadena*, 1968 [see p. 97], which has a caption implying a photographic original. In fact here Polke employs the powers of decomposition of his raster technique to create a shimmering image that consists exclusively of dots, patches and blanks. As it passes through the raster the landing site for the space probe becomes a landing site for the viewer's errant imagination.

These examples show how Polke's rasters are in a constant state of transition. In Reinhold Hohl's words: "not that a pictorial configuration 'is' this or that, but that it 'could be' something, or even something else."[49] It is like a free-floating, metamorphic game, engendered by the phantasmagoric quality of the raster dots, which in turn derives from their underlying ornamental character.

This is particularly so in the series *Kartoffelköppe* [Potato Heads], from which *Kartoffelköppe (Mao & LBJ)* 1965 [see p. 33] is on show here. Here the raster on the right side of the picture already seems like a parody of a real printed raster where representation is dependent on the homogeneity of the dot pattern. This system is vehemently contradicted here: each dot has a distinct and arbitrary colour and thus negates the functioning of the system. Towards the left of the picture the individual dots even begin to swell up, causing the sitter (Mao or Lyndon B. Johnson?) considerable problems and in this process, where the dots seem to be taking on an existence of their own, parody becomes self-parody. We have before us a process of poietic disillusion, where the imaginary becomes its own subject matter – a practice found elsewhere in the realms of Romantic irony and in keeping with Schlegel's requirement for poetry that it should "describe itself too in all its descriptions, and everywhere be both poetry and poetry of poetry."[50]

The significance of this is that works like the *Kartoffelköppe* created the conditions that have allowed the raster to become a multifarious means of representation and to function within consistently new and unexpected contexts, as it still does today.



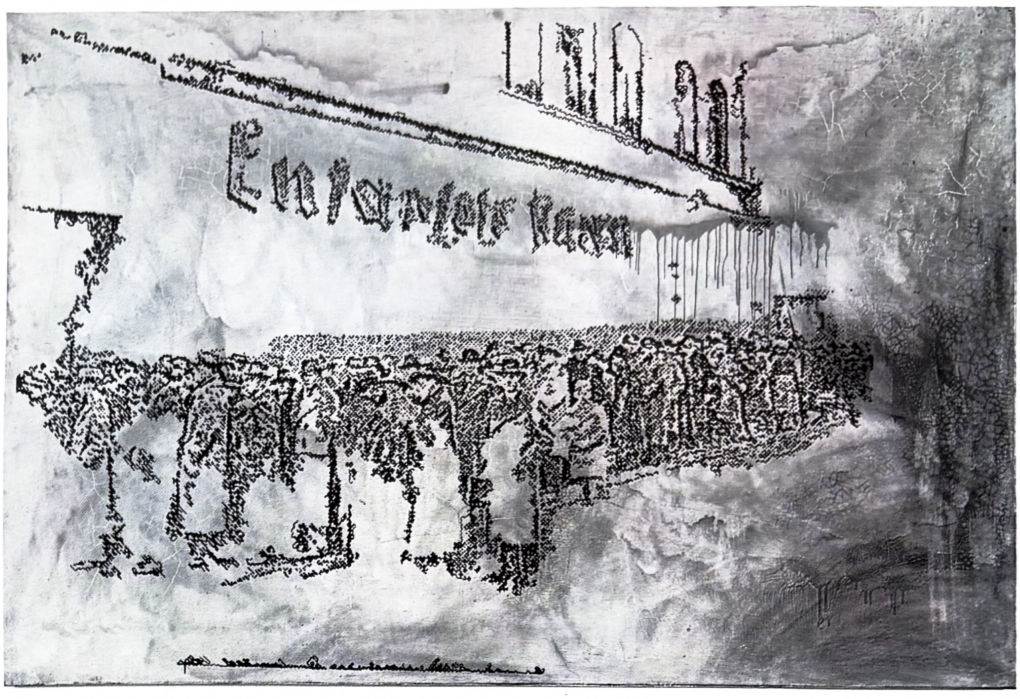
15 *Kleiner Mann*, 1986/92. Collection of Frieder Burda

16 *Großer Mann*, 1986/92. Collection of Frieder Burda

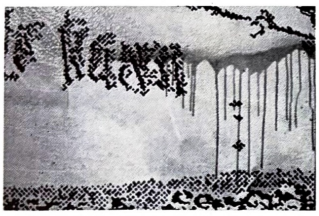
Chance and the Raster Continuum

In *Alice im Wunderland*, 1971 [Alice in Wonderland: see p. 227], we again find a fabric with a dot pattern: in this case it partly becomes the patterning on the mushroom. Painted in a form of iron ore, this work has distinctly magical qualities as does *Die Schere*, 1982 [The Scissors: see p. 229]. Rasters can even 'become' wire mesh as in *Amerikanisch-Mexikanische Grenze*, 1984 [American-Mexican Border: see p. 252], where a *Kleiner Mann* [Small Man] or a *Großer Mann* [Large Man], both 1986/92 (illus. 15, 16), may hide. On occasion the raster tells of the realms of fantasy (*Die Schuhe des Yeti*, 1994 – The Shoes of the Yeti)[51] or points to the interface

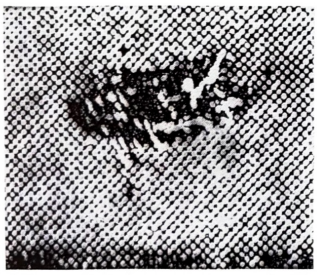
49 Hohl 1982, p. 74
50 Schlegel 1958ff. (2), p. 204 (Athenäumsfragment no. 238)



17 *Entartete Kunst*, 1983. Kunstmuseum Bonn, permanent loan from the Collection of Hans Grothe



18 Detail from *Entartete Kunst*



19 *Druckfehler*, 1996. Private collection

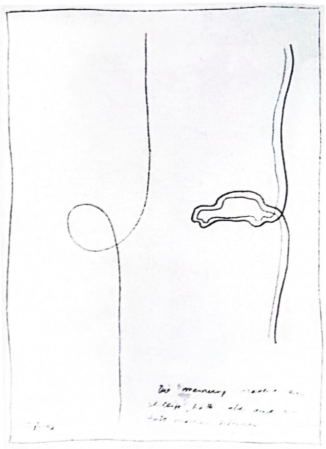
of aesthetics and history as in *Entartete Kunst*, 1983 [Degenerate Art], where a swastika emerges by chance from out of the pattern of dots (illus. 17/18).

This form of hallucinating seeing has more than a little to do with what the Surrealists called objective chance. In fact when Polke examined the reprint in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of the crowd outside the notorious exhibition of 'degenerate art' he did indeed discover a configuration of dots that finds its way into his own work as a swastika. André Breton defined the 'hasard objectiv' as the "meeting of outer causality and inner finality,"[52] and many of his followers, including Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, paid their own tribute to the fascination of taking the chance occurrences of the material world as magical dispositions.

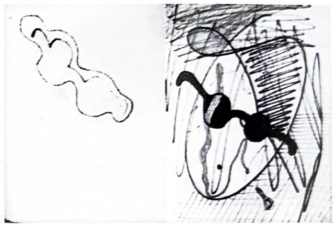
Polke has recently completed his series *Druckfehler*, 1996 [Printing Errors: illus. 19] which is devoted entirely to mutations in raster grids. Printing errors of this sort are familiar from newspapers and seem unavoidable despite advanced printing processes. Usually one ignores them. Not so Polke: he isolates these configurations and magnifies them until it is impossible to relate them to the original image. What was an error in the 'mesh' of the printed raster is re-composed by Polke and becomes a meta-visual world.[53] And in this sense the pictorial reality of the newspaper raster reveals itself as resistant to any codification. As to the size of this visual world: the works themselves do not let on whether it is cosmic and huge or microscopically small. But one thing is certain: that in the world of technical images, which we take as illustrations of reality, nothing is fixed and where we expect consistency we find

51 Illus. in: exh. cat. Polke, Valencia 1995, p. 86
52 Breton 1937, p. 23
53 See Berswordt-Wallrabe 1996

contingency. The reality to which these images refer is always temporary. It is not simply there; rather it is transitory and even then only exists by virtue of the power of the imagination. One world – the familiar world of the sayable – gives rise to many worlds and these bring with them the unfamiliar and the unsayable.



20 *Die Meinung macht eine Schleife...*, 1968.
Private collection



21/22 Two drawings from *Schulheft, blau (Tagebuch)*, circa 1970

4. The Metamorphoses of the Imagination

Existence and Relativity

Take a drawing from 1968 (illus. 20): on the left side Polke draws a line with a loop in it; on the right side the loop becomes the outline of a car and, as though to reinforce this, the line is doubled. The title on the paper reads: "Opinion makes a loop, could just as easily have made a car."

Now take another two drawings from the *Schulheft, blau (Tagebuch)*, circa 1970 [School Exercise Book, Blue (Dairy): illus. 21, 22]. On the right hand page there is a large, oval form that emerges from a free-flowing complex of lines, shading and meshes. A pair of dark glasses, seemingly stamped over it turns the image into a head. The glasses show through on the back of the same page but here the superimposed line drawing of a young woman turns them into a bra.

In this context the drawing *Umwandlung*, 1968 [Transformation], which Polke and Gerhard Richter worked on together is also of relevance.[54] It is an ironic depiction of the power of artistic imagination to transform a whole mountain range into a ball shape.

Less spectacular, yet hardly less effective, are the transformations perpetrated by ordinary people to give vent to their dissatisfaction with images of their leaders. Spurred on by the national elections of 1972 Sigmar Polke took a whole series of defaced election posters and published them with the title *Bizarre* (illus. 23). The artist's own eye is of course somewhat subtler, as may be seen in an over-drawn photograph from 1976/77 (illus. 24), where Polke has discovered a grotesque face in the coats of two customers sitting in a station bar. He creates a third figure from the fall of the cloth: a figure that is by definition transitory and owes its only existence to the conditions of that particular moment.

These are but a few examples amongst many. They are in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's assessment of the role of the carnival-grotesque, which is "to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate form from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and extablished truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."[55]

In terms of our intellectual history this attitude which has its roots in popular culture was absorbed by Nietzsche into his philosophy and subsequently revived by Dada. In Nietzsche's own words: "The world that concerns us is false, that is to say,

54 Illus. in: Block 1971, p. 146
55 Bakhtin 1965, p. 34

23 From *Bundestagswahl 1972 – Bizzarre*, Edition Staeck, Heidelberg, 1969

24 Over-drawn photographs from exh. cat. Polke/Duchow, Kasseler Kunstverein, 1997

not a fact, but a rounded extrapolation of a meagre collection of observations; it is 'fluid,' in the making, a constantly shifting falsehood that never approaches the truth: for – there is no truth."[56] The Dadaist Tristan Tzara takes up the same theme: "[...] everything is relative. What are beauty, truth, art, goodness, freedom? Words, that mean different things to different people."[57] Similarly, André Breton, the theoretician of Surrealism, is driven by the desire "to proceed beyond the insufficient, the absurd distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, true and false, good and evil [...]."[58]

In the 70s this thought was to take flight once more – first of all in the context of the theory of science: "The truth is what the mode of thought says is the truth"[59] as Paul Feyerabend put it, whose 'Anything goes' became the clarion call of Dadaism and anarchic epistemology, eventually leading to the theory of Postmodernism: "A Postmodern artist or writer is in the same position as a philosopher: the text that he is writing, the work that he is creating has no basic existing principles to follow [...]. Thus artists and writers are working without rules, they are working in order to construct the rules of *what will have been made*."[60] In his list of aspects of the Postmodern Ihab Hassan includes amongst other things: "Irony, perspectivism, reflexivity: these concepts express the human spirit's ever necessary creativity in the search for a truth which always recedes before one and allows the individual no more than ironic access to itself [...]."[61]

How this ironic access to the truth might appear in aesthetic terms is well illustrated by a drawing from Polke's *Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*, 1972/73 [Sketchbook, red-orange: illus. 25], which has recently given rise to an easel painting (1992, illus. 26) called *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind* [Seeing Things As They Are]. The title, cut out of a newspaper and stuck on to the picture is illustrated by several, hesitantly drawn rectangles: their outlines intersect, ironically casting doubt on their validity. The call to see things 'as they are' is therefore wholly misleading. For each angle relativises the other, thwarting the healthily plain language of picture's textual premis.

And the same thing happens to language in *Das war schon immer so – Das haben wir noch nie so gemacht – Da könnte ja jeder kommen* 1982 [It's always been like that – That's not how we did it before – Anyone could say that: see p. 209ff.]. For these lacquer panels completely contradict everyday experience and the concomitant metaphysical formulation that "there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances."[62]

Scientific 'Gravitas,' Magic and Irony

Polke early on broke with any such notion. His *Wiederbelebungsversuch an Bambusstangen*, 1968 [Attempted Resuscitation of Bamboo Poles: see p. 150], bears witness to the imagination's stubborn yet witty resistance to this principle of underlying reality, in this sense taking up Salvador Dalí's 'paranoid critical method': "paranoia

56 Nietzsche 1966, vol. 3, p. 497
57 Tristan Tzara, Lecture at the Dada Congress on 23 and 25 September 1922 in Weimar and Jena; repr. in: Tzara 1976, pp. 5–13; p. 8
58 Breton 1969, p. 125
59 Feyerabend 1982, p. 48
60 Jean-François Lyotard, in answer to the question 'What is Postmodern?' in: Welsch 1988, pp. 193 – 203; p. 202, italics as found
61 Ihab Hassan, 'Postmoderne heute', in: ibid., pp. 47 – 56; p. 52
62 Rorty 1989, p. 74

uses the outside world and its materials to concretise its own crazy notions. But it uses it in such a bafflingly individual way that it does not convey the reality of this mad system even to other paranoid people nor impose it on them." As far as Breton is concerned this method proves "the omnipotence of the desiring and wishing that are all Surrealism has ever believed in."[63] Polke's installation is set up like a biological 'experiment': next to the bowl with the bamboo poles there is a second bowl with square rods, to act as a 'control group,' the usual method used to establish the scientific validity of an experiment. But at the same time, all the rules of science are in fact invalidated by the very way the experiment is set up. Instead, magic comes into play, that "immediate dominance of the spirit over the material" which, according to August Wilhelm Schlegel, could lead to "wonderful, incomprehensible effects."[64]

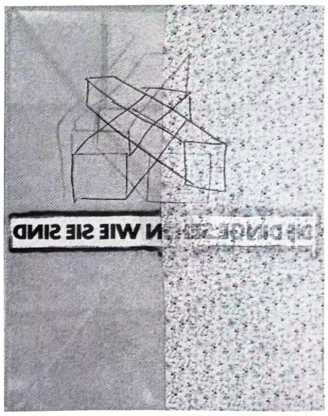
No less imbued with magic powers is the *Kartoffelhaus*, 1967 [Potato House: see p. 148], a kind of modified arbour, 'potato chest' and 'orgon box'[65] in one. The construction of spars with a potato impaled at each intersection (preferred variety: 'Ackersegen' – 'field blessing') alludes to the somewhat fantastic notion that the growing powers of the nightshade family could permeate the trellis like an electric net and transfer mysteriously to each person that enters the construction. What science views as abstruse has always been peculiarly fascinating to Polke. This piece shows the first signs of the importance that alchemy is to assume in his later works, relying as it does on the "omnipotence of the desiring and the wishing" that is an intrinsic part of an artistic imagination of Polke's sort.

On the other hand, it is impossible not to notice the ironic elements both of *Wiederbelebung...* and of *Kartoffelhaus*. For, however much scientific order may be rendered magical by the imagination, nevertheless magic does not in reality come to pass: the bamboo does not sprout and one leaves the potato house unscathed, exactly as one had entered it. From out of the possible realities presented in these works there emerges a "ironic parascience"[66] which gives aesthetic expression to what is null and void as far as scientific logic is concerned. Thus magic and irony are dialectically linked.

They could be viewed as modes of the comic. In the words of Odo Marquard: "The things which are funny and provoke laughter bring to light the trivial aspects of what is officially valid and the valid aspects of what is officially trivial."[67] Thoughts of Duchamp's 'science amusante'[68] as described by Herbert Molderings come to mind. The latter sees in Duchamp's first ready-made, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, a "combined pseudo-scientific construction and object for meditation"[69]: a formulation which could be applied only too well to these works by Polke.

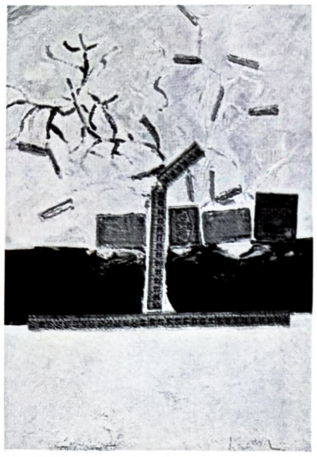
Duchamp's ironic parascience manifests itself most clearly in his *Trois Stoppages – Étalon* [Three Threads for Invisible Mending – Standard Length], also from 1913. He took three threads, each a metre long and dropped them on to a flat surface. From the resulting chance shapes he formed three measuring sticks which he

25 *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind*, from *Skizzenbuch, rot-orange*, 1972/73. Private collection

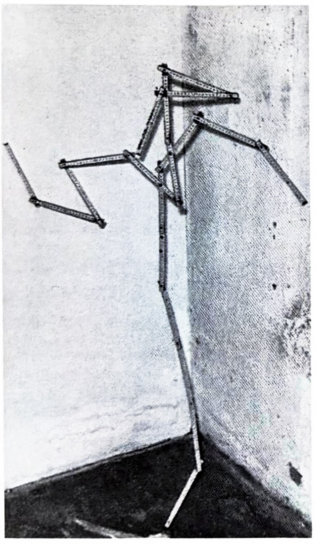


26 *Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind*, 1992. Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe – Garnatz Collection

63 André Breton, quoted in Nadeau 1965, p. 168, p. 169
64 Quoted in Kapitza 1968, p. 63
65 In the terminology of Friedrich W. Heubach (text included in this publication)
66 Molderings 1983, p. 37
67 Marquard 1976, p. 141
68 A term used by the French journal *La Nature* for scientific phantasies.
69 Molderings 1983, p. 41



27 Francis Picabia,
Les Centimètres, 1918–20.
Schwarz Collection, Milan



28 *Zollstockpalme*, 1966.
Private collection

arranged in a box, rather like the 'platinum-standard metre' that is kept in the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres. Thus whimsy and chance are granted the status of world-wide standards. And elsewhere too, official measuring units become the battleground for an offensive against scientific rationality: as, for example, in Raoul Hausmann's object *Geist unserer Zeit*, 1919 [Spirit of our Times] – mounted on a monstrously altered head – or transformed into a tree trunk in Francis Picabia's collage *Les Centimètres*, 1918 – 1920 (illus. 27).

Polke makes subversive use of a measuring-stick in his *Zollstockpalme*, 1966 [Inch Rule Palm: illus. 28], which is then taken up in the folio *...Höhere Wesen befehlen*, 1968 [Higher Beings Command] along with further 'possible palm forms.' All the items contained in the folio share the pseudo-scientific gravitas of the written explanations, as does the folio itself which bears a significant resemblance to large sheets of card, with charts or facts, once used in schools as a whole-class teaching aid. Thus gravitas finds that the levity of triviality has caught up with it once and for all.

Meanwhile Polke's parascience continues to fruit, as in the drawing, *Erweiterung des Planetensystems um einen 10. Planeten*, 1968 [Enlargement of the Planetary System by a 10th Planet: illus. 29], where the new planet is, of course, called Polke; or as in *Sternenhimmel-Tuch* 1969 [Starry Heavens Cloth: see p. 165] where Polke uses an astronomical card as the intellectual framework for the mythological notion of an 'extraordinary heavenly occurrence.' The paradigm of this notion is the Star of Bethlehem that appeared at the time of the birth of Jesus. Polke built on this coincidence by giving 24.6 (without the year) as the date of the appearance of 'his' planet, hinting at the concept of 'completed circles.'[70] Each year, the viewer is informed, this sight will return to the night sky, showing that this artist is no ordinary mortal.

Yet at the same time – and here a pattern is beginning to emerge – the artist deflates his own 'elevation,' by using cardboard circles and strips of sticky tape for the stars. The potential variability that thereby surfaces in the constellation deconstructs the configuration of astronomy, astrology and tales about the artist. Whatever the starry heavens say to us: it could all be completely different.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that Polke homes in on motifs that in themselves are concerned with the 'transformability of things.' *Alice im Wunderland*, 1971 [see p. 227], comes into this category. Lewis Carroll's story is based on the contradictory logic of the 'wonderful,' itself subject to constant transformation. Polke goes back to the illustration by John Tenniel which focuses paradigmatically on the very essence of the narrative: we see the caterpillar – itself a metamorphic creature – smoking a hookah, sitting on a mushroom, which Polke's dots turn into a fly agaric. "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter," says the caterpillar to Alice who has shrunk to such an extent that she can only just see over the edge of the mushroom. In addition to this, the football players, complementing

70 See Blumenberg 1979, pp. 76ff.

the dot patterns, also change their size until they transform into the chimeric giant on the right hand side of the picture.

The theme is yet further developed in *Tischerücken*, 1981 [Table Turning: see p. 217], where there are no clearly defined forms, simply a multivalent paint mass, representing 'ectoplasm,' supposedly substantial matter that may appear through a medium in a spiritualist meeting. Polke combines this eruptive form with a sober diagram of telekinesis and thus demonstrates again the deconstructive power of his images. For what is apparently paraded as proof of the parapsychological phenomenon, itself proves to be a phantasm. The fabric ground plays no little part in this, creating a third level to the picture and invoking the bourgeois domestic interiors where séances of this sort might take place.

Whenever Polke enters the realms of magic – as in *Magnetische Landschaft*, 1982 [Magnetic Landscape: see p. 228], or in *Die Schere*, 1982 [The Scissors: see p. 229] – irony follows close on his heels. Thus his forays into parapsychology should not be misunderstood as reinforcing his criticism of scientific rationality. His interest in the magical is always the ironic interest of a person who has cast off the strictures of the western world and is now using his new-found freedom to see about those things that did not fit into the prevalent notion of progress. Reservations about everything also lead to an interest in everything. And everything could always be completely different.

29 *Erweiterung des Planetensystems um einen 10. Planeten*, 1968. Private collection

Laterna Magica: Lucidity – Transparency – Projection

This latter point is clearly demonstrated by the various versions of the *Laterna Magica* [see p. 319ff.], which Polke first showed during his series of exhibitions in the United States between 1990 and 1992.[71] The whole wash of western culture – fairy tales, magic, history and the present – seems to be gathered into this work. What matters particularly is the way that these areas are brought together: they all go back to the notion of metamorphosis. While the raster and fabric pictures are already consistently metamorphic, this quality is vastly increased in the *Laterna Magica*. This stems from the fact that all the individual elements are united by 'transparency.'

Polke produced his first transparent works in 1987,[72] that is to say, soon after he had created his wall-paintings for the XLII Biennale in Venice in 1986, using hydrosensitive paints that changed colour according to humidity levels. The transparent works then transport these changing colours into imaginary space. Proximity and distance, visibility and illusion constantly shift, caught up in the play of opacity and lucidity as the paint thickens and thins. And this interplay is yet further increased by fact that the *Laterna Magica* is in fact a screen made up of many different pictures, each with its own perspective.

The 'laterna magica' was one of the earliest devices for projecting images.[73] They were first used and distributed for the purposes of religious instruction by Jesuit scientists exploiting the mystery of how the pictures were created in order to fool their

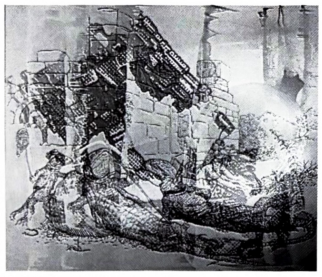
71 See Flood 1995 and Hentschel 1995

72 See exh. cat., Polke, New York 1989

73 See Hoffmann and Junker 1982

30 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

31 Detail from *Münchner Bilderbogen Nr. 77–80, Kartenspielereien Nr. 1*, circa 1852



32 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

innocent audiences into thinking they were in the presence of magical forces that would show them the writing on the wall. Only as the technological secrets were gradually revealed did these visits to the realms of the numinous become purely entertaining, generally taking place at fairgrounds. As well as the phantasmagoria that were included in every performance, the laterna magica would also tell of distant parts and adventurous expeditions, of different events – some relatively likely, some wholly unlikely, some positively grotesque. The fascination lay in the fact that by superimposing images all sorts of things could be simulated: daytime and night-time, the seasons, motion, fire – illusions that eventually led to modern day cinema.

By painting his transparents on both sides, Polke takes up the original practice of projecting multiple images. But while the aim in the early days of the laterna magica was to heighten the illusion and for the viewer to lose themselves in the images, Polke combines images that seem both heterogeneous and incompatible. Thus in his montages, the apparently disparate unite and 'illusory' experience is replaced by 'imaginary' experience. Viewers will see what is there differently and, in the process, each will become aware of him or herself according to whatever they are focusing on. And even the act of focusing is always, by definition, transitory, insofar as the images that emerge are always accompanied and even cut across by other sensations. In this sense, the picture breaks free from its carrier, creating its own 'optical level' which is, however, not fixed but instead prone to waver in an indeterminate manner. As the viewer enters into Polke's *Laterna Magica* the magical, flickering lights of the original projections come on of their own accord in the viewer's inner perception.

Representational motifs, paint masses and trails of colour, fabric designs and painting run the gamut of visibility, with the range extending from pictorial narrative to close to a point where the descriptive powers of language start to fail. The variety of sources that Polke draws on is scarcely credible: playing cards, comics, cartoons, artistic drawings, alchemical illustrations, fairy tales: nothing seems to escape his encyclopaedic interest. And all the time he consistently returns to motifs that are intrinsically metamorphic, as for example to a card from the card games published in 1852 by the *Münchner Bilderbogen* (illus. 30, 31) where the hearts are grotesquely embellished with human figures. He is equally taken by a drawing by Grandville (1803–1847), (illus. 32), where two lizards are resting in front of an old wall – one wearing a jacket and a neckerchief and smoking a pipe while the other, turned casually towards him, is wearing a frock coat. The other side of the transparent is dominated by 'transformers,' half-machine and half-animal or human being, favourite children's toys with the intriguing capacity to change from one thing into another. Taken together, which the lucidity of the transparent makes possible, a new reading emerges where the humanisation of the animal world answers the 'animalised' beings of the machine world.

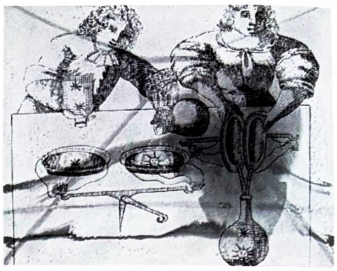
In two of the transparents there are depictions of the 'chymic marriage' of disparate substances – in alchemic terms, the union of mercury, quicksilver and salt

(illus. 33, 34, 35).[74] Polke interweaves these pictorial quotations with pools of lacquer on both sides, where the allegorical allusion apparently becomes fact. And even the Red Lion (the code name for the philosopher's stone), the final product of the alchemical process of 'conjunctio,' is depicted in one picture [see p. 332], hidden in a design of acanthus tendrils, coupled with red lacquer.

Solve et coagula [dissolve and unite]: this basic principle of alchemy could equally well stand as a motto above the different versions of the *Laterna Magica*; for its constituent parts are in a constant process of transformation, both as they are perceived and in their connotations. To come back to Novalis: "At this time he found everywhere objects already known to him but marvellously mingled and mated, and strange vicissitudes often arose within him. Soon he became aware of the inter-relation of all things, of conjunctions, of coincidences. Ere long he saw nothing singly."[75]

In fact Polke's *Laterna Magica* can be read as a shorthand account of the world, but with its own perspective, different to customary modes of perception. The discovery of perspective with a fixed central viewpoint during the Renaissance naturally tempted artists into notions of superiority and dominance, taking the 'seen' as dependent on and coming from the seer. Modern science, on the other hand, is largely founded on the concept of space as homogenous and isotropic, quite the opposite to the idea of the self-centred observer. The perspective-based importance attributed to location paved the way for the division of the world into individual scientific disciplines, which in turn laid the foundations for notions of dominance and power.

And now the double perspective of the *Laterna Magica* subjects all that is seen to literal 'revision.' All those certainties that rely on a fixed location are instantly confronted with their own opposites. This goes to the heart of alchemical metaphor that is part of this work, for alchemy itself is based on the principle of polarity. But where everything is "doubled,"[76] suddenly we find ourselves in that carnivalesque world which resists all notions of order and dominance, revealing the deeper meaning of the multiple perspectives that Polke develops in his translucent images.



33 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

34 Page from "Altus" (pseudonym), *Mutus Liber*, La Rochelle, 1677

35 *Laterna Magica*, 1988–96

5. On the Picture of the Artist and Art

Profaned Inspiration: 'Vitrinenstück' [Showcase Piece]

The realms of magic are where Polke goes to free himself from the enforced norms of scientific reason, only then to disavow the magical in order to ensure his access to the freedom of irony.

This dialectic – involving the norms of art as an institution – re-emerges in *Vitrinenstück*, 1966 [Showcase Piece: see p. 152], an installation in several parts.

"I STOOD BEFORE THE CANVAS, INTENDING TO PAINT A BUNCH OF FLOWERS. THEN FROM HIGHER BEINGS I RECEIVED THE COMMAND: NO BUNCH OF FLOWERS! PAINT FLAMINGOS! AT FIRST I INTENDED TO GO ON PAINTING AS BEFORE,

74 With grateful thanks at this point to Federica Gussoni of Stuttgart for kindly granting me access to *Mutus Liber* (La Rochelle 1677).

75 Novalis 1903, p. 93

76 See Gebelein 1991, p. 42

BUT THEN I REALISED THAT THEY MEANT BUSINESS." This is the artist's account of the picture which is the main protagonist in his installation, and as if by way of proof the picture of flamingos in the centre has a surtitle: THE PICTURE THAT WAS PAINTED AT THE COMMAND OF HIGHER BEINGS. In addition, there is a whole typewritten page giving details of how the picture came to be: the minutes of a visitation in which peas, saucers and further commands all have their part to play.

Consider the surtitle itself: it goes back to a topos with a long history, that of the divinely possessed artist, with the notion of inspiration as passed down from antiquity emphasising the irresistible moment of divine intervention. Schelling refers to this same phenomenon: "however purposeful he is, the artist still [...] seems to stand under the influence of a power that separates him from all other human beings and compels him to say or depict things which he himself does not completely understand and which are infinite in their meaning."[77] Surrealism was to turn this concept of a command from above into psychical automatism, by-passing conscious control.

It is not by chance that Polke focuses on the moment of compulsion. During his encounter with the Higher Beings unbelievable things happened: he was ordered to hold saucers up to his ears, to scrape away the sulphur tips on matches, to saw up one of his own pictures and perform other obscure acts – strange things to be happening in an artist's studio. Above all, the Higher Beings made their presence felt the next morning when the artist found the room filled with airborne peas, which he rightly recognised as dangerous flying objects. And it was of course peas that put a sudden stop to the wondrous activities of the Little People of Cologne in the well-known German folk-tale – so, here too, the peas point to the dangers of independent artistic productivity. But who would dare intervene so brutally in the creative process?

The showcase itself gives us a hint. As well as proof of the visitation, it contains a clue that is not mentioned in Polke's own notes, but which speaks all the more loudly for that: it is the Catalogue for *documenta I* which took place in 1955. It is open at a double spread showing Max Beckmann on the left and on the right the jury meeting for the Künstlerbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1952. Amongst others, the jury includes Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Ewald Mataré, Georg Meistermann, Emil Schumacher and Ernst Heckel: all artists who enjoyed high reputations in Germany in the 50s.

Polke adds a caption above the picture: "One day they, too, will see that it is better to paint at the command of Higher Beings." And now, in the light of this particular ingredient in the installation, the whole phantasmagoria of the encounter with Higher Beings takes an unexpectedly profane turn. For the Beings can suddenly be identified as the selection bodies that form an integral part of art as an institution. Like *documenta* itself, countless juries define the artistic landscape making decisions that decide the fate of artists' work. In the typescript it says: "they want to dissemi-

77 Schelling 1958, pp. 617f.

nate their culture, religion and language, I have felt their power" and the meaning of this sentence is only too mundane.

The ironic ambivalence inherent in the *Vitrinenstück* rests on the virtual identification of the 'Higher Beings' with the jury as a body of selectors, implying that it could be these very 'art judges' who have forced the flamingos on the artist, whilst preventing him from painting a bunch of flowers. And all the time, the flamingo picture is the last thing that would have found favour with this jury – pointing up the ambivalence and cutting wit of the reference to the notion of inspiration. For what traditionally comes from the dictates of 'Higher Beings' is in its very nature free from error: a notion that feeds the dogma, for example, that goes with claims that the Bible was divinely inspired. And it allows artists to withdraw, along with what they have created, into a realm where they are not subjected to judgement.

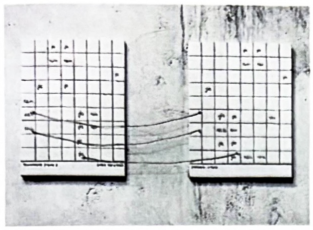
In that realm, for better or for worse, criticism will have no effect. But since the motifs 'flamingos' and 'bunch of flowers' occupy the same level of irony in Polke's eyes, this means that whole of the artist's work is free from any form of judgement.

Thus the inspiration theory takes a double dialectical turn. On the one hand, a whole collection of pieces of evidence are presented to prove the intervention of 'Higher Beings,' while on the other hand this intervention is reduced to the level of mundane tutelage on the part of those employed to judge art and finally – linking back again to the dictates of the Higher Beings – artistic activity now moves beyond the reach of any form of criticism. The crucial twists occur only insofar as each element in the installation is presented in the 'non-actual' mode which may be defined as 'irony.' But the *Vitrinenstück* may also be read as parody, in the sense that David Roberts understands the wider meaning of parody, that is to say, as an artistic modality that makes use both of the forms of production and the norms of reception determined by art as an institution.[78]

A Sweep through the Topoi of the Image of the Artist

Parody, as defined here, is also found in other works dealing with the topoi of the artist and artistic work. The previously mentioned folio *...Höhere Wesen befehlen*, 1968, for example, has a whole arsenal of these topoi. In *Fotokreis (Menschenkreis)* I, 1968 [Photo Circle (People Circle) I: see p. 149], Polke, quoting himself, refers directly back to the immediately preceding *Vitrinenstück*, for the centre of the work is taken up by a photograph (stuck to card) of the artist holding two saucers up to his ears. "And I could hear the saucers as they spoke to me," Polke notes in the *Vitrinenstück* in epiphanic terms. But the voice of the Godhead is now replaced by a babble of heterogeneous, profane voices. The circle of human figures round the artist is in fact largely taken by Polke from *Körperbau und Charakter* [Physical Build and Character] by Ernst Kretschmer, a highly dubious treatise on character types, going back to antique notions of temperament and based on empirical observation alone.

78 See Roberts 1987, pp. 175ff.



36 *Telepathische Sitzung I (Max Klinger – Sigmar Polke)*, 1968. Staatliche Museen Kassel, Neue Galerie, loan from private collection, Kassel

Initially the relationship of centre and periphery is certainly an allusion to the concept of genius: the god-like artist stands out from the circle of ordinary mortals whom he controls. However, the implications of inspiration reverse the values in this photograph, for the artist who favours ordinary human inspiration over divine inspiration, is certainly not able to create any works of genius.

Insofar as the human circle consists of heterogeneous and disparate characters that come together in the figure of the artist, the artist declares himself to be 'without character.' This is reasonable in the sense that, in terms of history, the typology of character has replaced notions of 'genius.'[79] Viewed in a positive light, the reliance on a whole variety of characters frees the artist from the tutelage of institutional art – however hard it tries in the time-honoured way to intervene in the artist's work. The process is similar to that in *Vitrinenstück*: The artist uses self-irony to question artistic topoi, in order to ensure his own freedom. In addition, this work also has a distinctly self-analytical aspect: the mismatch of the various temperaments clearly recalls those other carnivalesque mismatches that were so crucial to the works with heterogeneous fabrics and patterns.

Also in 1968, and as counterparts to *Menschenkreis*, Polke created two works inspired by two artists of repute: Max Klinger and William Blake (illus. 36). Both inhabit the kingdom of the dead, which gives conversation with them a somewhat occult touch, although it is in itself reminiscent of Nietzsche's description of the philosophers of ancient Greece: "[...] one giant calls out to another across the arid intervals of ages, and, undisturbed by a wanton, noisy race of dwarfs, creeping about beneath them, the sublime intercourse of spirit continues."[80] Where Nietzsche is employing metaphor, Polke sets up a quasi parapsychological experiment. In the 30s, the Professor of Psychology, Joseph B. Rhine and his colleague, Karl Edward Zener, carried out experiments using so-called Zener cards, in order to establish statistical proof of the existence of telepathy. The 'sender' or 'agent' – hidden from sight – turns over one card after the other and the 'receiver' or 'perceiver' tries to tell which card the sender has just turned over. In this light, the different pictorial fields look like quasi scientific reports. Thin lines show the number of telepathic 'hits.' What the dispute is, remains a mystery, as does the question as to how it is possible to record results from long-dead senders. Whatever the allusions to scientific reports, the system of pictorial fields and the arbitrary lines are without any real logic, other than the logic of humour.

However obviously Polke is using self-irony to both legitimise and deconstruct his position as an artist, there is method in his choice of these figures from the other side: Klinger is important to Polke for his combinatory skills clearly entering the realms of fantasy as in his series of engravings *Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhs* [Paraphrase on Finding a Glove: 1878–1881], and which de Chirico also valued highly. And Blake is a truly kindred spirit. In Werner Hofmann's words: "As long as he lived, Blake opposed any institution that tried to exert its power over

79 See Weinrich 1976, col. 362f.
80 Nietzsche 1911, p. 79

people with the privileges of ownership."[81] And this ultimately applied to the 'art gurus' who wanted to force creativity to submit to rules and dogma: "Rules make the path straight" – in Blake's own words – "but crooked, unstraightened paths are the paths of genius."[82] Certainly Polke would have no hesitation in ascribing to this statement.

It is only logical, that in setting out to reassess the topoi that colour the image of the artist and atistic work, Polke should also focus on artworks and their diction, and this he does in a whole series of parodies.

Parody and Assimilation

The picture *Dürer-Hase*, 1968 [Dürer Hare: see p. 121], painted on patterned fabric, focuses on the 'exploitation' of an image for a never-ending series of calendars, brochures, towels, table cloths and so on. Polke demonstrates the resulting mix of art and the trivial that disturbs the art lover and the lover of 'kitsch' alike. In *Gummibandbild Dürer-Hase,* 1970 [Rubber Band Dürer Hare: see p. 169] parody reaches ridiculous heights allowing viewers to create their own 'Dürer Hare' whenever they want. The way art is received is also the focus of *Reh,* 1968 [Deer: see p. 116], which shows Franz Marc's well-known deer on a cheap youth hostel blanket. It is a tightly worked parody: by bedding the deer on a woolly blanket Polke wittily and pointedly gives his subject 'natural surroundings' of a sort, turning a distorting mirror as it were on Marc's nature mysticism.

The treatment meted out to his contemporaries is no different: Polke's ability to stand a theme on its head is impressively demonstrated in *Carl Andre in Delft*, 1968 [see p. 157]. It was in October 1967, when Konrad Lueg, using the surname Fischer, opened his gallery in the Neubrückstraße in Düsseldorf, that Polke had his first chance to see Andre's work for himself. The piece in question was *5x20 Altstadt Rectangle*, 1967 [5 x 20 Old Town Rectangle], an installation consisting of 100 square steel plates all of exactly the same size. At the time the work constitued a leading example of minimal art, for Andre had dared to break with traditional notions of sculpture in several different ways. A straightforward industrial product is used, which means that the artist has not worked the material. The body of the sculpture is no more than the technically predetermined thickness of the material used. Thus there is no room for illusion. It is a non-relational work, that is to say, it does not consist of a complex arrangement of disparate parts that become one immutable whole, but is instead simply a non-axial, balanced arrangement of identical elements. Thus the pattern could always be continued and its actual dimensions are only determined by the exhibition space, which it in turn defines. Lastly the sculpture may be walked on and as such – according to Andre himself – expresses its own history[83] at the same time as rejecting prevalent convention.

Although Polke's parodistic response *Carl Andre in Delft* has little to do with Andre's works, it does, however, focus brilliantly on the way that they must be read.

81 Werner Hofmann, 'Die Erfüllung der Zeit', in: Hofmann 1975, pp. 11 – 30; p. 14
82 Blake 1927, pl. 10
83 See exh. cat., Andre 1996, p. 42

Like Andre, Polke uses an existing product and intuitively recognises the potential inherent in what Andre is doing, although the latter does not arrive at the same point until 1969: namely the alternating pattern. But here the similarity ends. By introducing a white framework into the picture Polke transforms a non-relational structure into a relational structure: this is the only conceivable form for this particular image. The inscription makes it clear that the motif is a quotation, both witty and somewhat malevolent. As much as the Delft tiles – so utterly illusionistic – would repel the purist Andre, all the more does the kitschy pattern – illustrating an illustration – run counter to his innermost feelings. Yet at the same time the stretto of tiled pattern and steel plates does have a serious point: the topos of the non-personal. For Andre's works reject on principle any hint of the artist's own hand and the same may certainly be said of Delft tiles whether they are used to decorate a room or as a pattern on a towel.

By seemingly relating to Andre's approach, Polke extends the discrepancy between his phantasm and a real 'Andre' as far as it will go. For where the phantasm comes close to the original, it infects it with the virus of kitsch, the non-serious and the banal: forces that pull the rug out from under the feet of any attempt to create meaning and sense. In this work, sense is always disrupted with nonsense, real feeling is disrupted by laughter. But it is characteristic of Polke's comedy – unlike that of Andre – that what is expressed in this way does not become a mission statement. The moment the implied critical response is taken seriously, the laughter dies away. On the other hand, true irony returns to itself, leaving behind it the cause of the merriment – which accounts for its particular capacity for reconciliation.

This capacity for reconciliation comes to the fore in the *Streifenbilder*, 1967 – 1968 [Stripe Paintings: see pp. 118, 119]. Of course these works can be read as parodies of abstract painting, but the real nature of the relationship is not clearly defined and the actual points of reference uncertain. All that can be said for certain, is that these intentionally clumsy painting exercises are all carried out on a coloured ground which is seen by its frame to be a picture within a picture. And in this sense the viewer is prevented from seeing the brushstrokes as immediate gestures. In this context Benjamin H. D. Buchloh refers aptly to "theoretical-practical reflections on painting: not only on its motivation and its techniques, but also on the qualities of the results (expressive – meditative – constructive) and the historical models that preceded these, and on the way that these very historical and theoretical reflections themselves are incorporated into the act of painting."[84]

All these criteria come together in *Moderne Kunst*, 1968 [Modern Art: see p. 123], a work that has already acquired the status of an incunabulum, although it would appear to be almost wholly 'secondhand.' It is a dissonant collection of forms that occur individually elsewhere in Polke's drawings and paintings. And in the process all the categories that serve to accommodate the different modalities of abstract art are neutralised, as it were – exactly as happens with the umbrella term 'modern art.'

84 Buchloh 1976, p. 150

But the reverse also applies: given the title, *Moderne Kunst*, the various elements of the picture can be read differently as standing for the verbal shorthand that is widely bandied about: 'splotches' and 'squiggles' and 'streaks' that 'any child could do.' Seen in this light, the aspect of this picture that trips the viewer up is the fact that the words 'modern art' are used as though to guarantee the work's quality while they in fact do no more than gather up the props left over by the tabloid view of modern art.

This work is both complex and comprehensive in that it focuses on the modalities of artistic production and on the assimilation of art at one and the same time.

It does not seem right to characterise these works as parody in the narrower sense, because they are not based on specific originals. They function instead much more as a kind of ironic assimilation, that is characterised by a "wide interest in all sorts of forms and things."[85]

And in pursuit of this interest, these works create a stage for themselves against the backdrop of the most diverse of paradigms ranging from Dürer and Franz Marc to the practices of modern art. The different levels and forms of language that Polke develops in the process do nevertheless express a degree of reservation towards the accumulated traditions that he draws on. One could in fact describe these reservations as ironic. Polke's reservations towards tradition spark off his ironic games with those same traditions. This in turn throws light on Polke's own artistic polyglottism and heterogeneity. For where one's own subjectivity is only ever formulated with an eye to 'the other's' subjectivity and where that eye is reserved to say the least, then heterogeneity would appear to be the only suitable form for articulating that same subjectivity. This in itself is in keeping with the experience of Postmodernity. In his discussion of irony, Kierkegaard declares that "actuality has lost its validity."[86] Similarly Lyotard described Postmodernity as the "end of the meta-narratives,"[87] and this notion is then further developed by Richard Rorty in his rejection of the vocabulary of closure. To quote Kierkegaard again: "In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself – that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything."[88]

6. Worked by Chance – the Workings of Nature

As irony talks back to the real world, so it also finds other, possible worlds. Kierkegaard even goes so far as to say that the ironist "becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities..."[89] And, in this, chance plays into his hands: "The notion of chance implies that things could have been different, that the necessity that encompasses it, still leaves it an abundance of choices."[90] For Polke it is therefore simply logical to allow chance to play its part in the making of a picture.

He first does this by intervening in the chemical processes of photography. For a start, the series of 41 photographs, *Paris 1971*, (illus. 37) gives an impressive exam-

85 Japp 1983, p. 195
86 Quoted in ibid., p. 24
87 Quoted in Welsch 1988, p. 15
88 Kierkegaard 1989, p. 257
89 Ibid., p. 262
90 Köhler 1973, p. 14

37 Photograph from *Paris 1971*. Private collection

38 *Baumhütte*, 1976. Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

ple of an image being perforated and confronted with unpredictable chemical reactions – even to the extent of photographic 'decalcomania.'

"The aesthetics of fluidity"[91] where production is open-ended and influenced by chance, can also lead to ways of reading and interpreting representational art. In this sense, the chance form functions no differently to the dots in a raster picture or the pattern in a fabric picture as a "moule": an "elementary structure"[92] which is transformative and multivalent, according to context.

In the series of photographs *Bowery New York*, 1973, for example, (which Charles Haxthausen discusses elsewhere in this volume) Polke worked with very thin photographic paper which he put folded-up into the developing fluid because he had no larger developing trays. Thus the chemical process could only work up to a point. "I started off by making all the mistakes that you can make when you are developing and enlarging, but used these mistakes to interpret the images as I made them, because the dossers are lying in the dirt anyway."[93] The element of chance creeps like a chimera into representational images and thus produces connotations that could not have been evoked by one or the other in isolation.

The same applies to the painting on paper, *Baumhütte*, 1976 [Tree House: illus. 38], which consists of three bands of colour with a tree house, of the kind that the Koiari made in New Guinea in the early nineteenth century[94] rising up majestically in front of them. Again the image offers an interpretation of itself: this time in the irregular course of the paint – earth brown, sky blue and blood red – which gathers into large patches, solidifying and yet at the same time spraying aggressively apart. The colours tell of the paradisical harmony of humankind and Nature as it were, of the adventurousness of a life that we can only evoke as a dream and at the same time they tell of the destruction that homo faber has introduced to this form of life.

Even more than his work with photo-chemistry, it was Polke's journeys in 1980/81 to Asia and Australia that helped him to acquire a different awareness of the value of pictorial colour. While the colours in *Baumhütte* grew out of Polke's own imagined picture of that lost world, the three part work *Negativwerte I – III (Alkor, Mizar, Aldebaran)*, 1982 [Negative Values I – III (Alkor, Mizar, Aldebaran): see pp. 221–223], is based on the real experiences that Polke brought back with him from his travels. Not just that he now combined materials in mixtures that he had never tried before: red lead underpainting, violet pigment and oil paint: in addition he now also maltreated them to the extent that he consciously overstepped the limits of control. Thus chance was again incorporated into the works.

Changing Colours

Anyone who has seen these pictures will know that no printed reproduction can begin to do justice to their colours. These not only change according to the angle of the light falling on them, but also according to the angle that they are viewed from. As far as colour goes, *Alkor* and *Mizar* are similar. If one approaches these from the

91 Bice Curiger, in: exh. cat. Polke, Cologne 1989, p. 8
92 Hofmann 1976, p. 14
93 *Parkett*, no. 26 (1990), p. 16
94 See Schmidt 1988, pp. 193ff. although I do not share his interpretation of the colours in this work.

side they at first seem deep violet or black, with an iridescent bronze shimmer playing across the surface. If they are viewed parallel to the picture the bronze shimmer does not entirely disappear but becomes an olive green tone, which itself has touches of yellow and black. The green, on the other hand, changes with the violet which at some points dominates the surface of the picture and at other points glows from within the depths of the picture. In *Alkor* the violet combines with red tones in the top third of the picture, whereas in the centre of the work, it partially breaks up; in *Mizar* it is mixed with white and becomes glaringly bright. In *Aldebaran*, violet dominates whatever the lighting or viewing point, it goes more into black than the other two, but does have the same greenish-bronze shimmer as the other two. *Aldebaran* is the only one of the three which allows occasional glimpses of the picture ground: because of the extremely fine, pigment-like layers that combine in various thicknesses, the white of the picture ground seems more like light than anything else.

The colours of all three pictures – the colour values and depths, their smooth transitions – are yet further heightened as soon as they are viewed in direct sunlight. The violet changes to dark blue, the olive green becomes a dark green and a mother of pearl sheen floods the picture, dematerialising it, as it were. Thoughts come to mind of the sudden, oscillating shine on medieval gold grounds when they are struck by daylight, or of the constantly changing colour that Heinz Roosen-Runge has observed in the 9th century *Book of Kells* from Ireland.[95] In fact the range of nuances that the violet (particularly in *Alkor*) displays has more than a little in common with the semi-transparent 'folium' that was frequently used in medieval book illustration, and which ranged from red-brown to purple and shades of blue.[96] Because of its range and its transparence – and particularly when it is used, as in the *Book of Kells*, in different glazes and mixed with other colours – the folium can change and even appear fluorescent, creating an overall impression of 'non-corporeality.'[97] Similar changes define *Negativwerte* as a visual experience. None of the colours stands alone, for they are all interwoven as a coloured mesh, from which individual tones emerge with varying authority, growing suddenly stronger or sinking back into the depths of the open picture space. Although it is possible to make out the materiality of the paint from close to, as soon as the pictures are viewed from a distance the colours become elusive, they seem to float and refuse to be pinned down to any particular spot.

The sense of something eluding one's grasp is increased by the fact that in all three works there are hints of figures, which nevertheless remain so vague that they even seem to flee one another. This game of something yet nothing is most highly developed in *Alkor*. The upper half of the picture would appear to contain the outline of an archer. Left of centre, shifting between red-violet and blue, there is a bowed head, and there seems to be another to its right outlined in green-violet. On the right side of the picture there are further traces of figures, but these defy descrip-

95 Roosen-Runge 1977, pp. 154ff.; Paul Groot mentions the *Book of Kells* in this context although without further explanation (Groot 1988, p. 68)

96 See Roosen-Runge 1973, col. 1472f.

97 An excerpt from Roosen-Runge's analysis of colour used in medieval book illustration may serve to illustrate the similarity of these phenomena. After his discussion of the *Gospel Book of Lindisfarne,* Roosen-Runge continues: "Quite fantastic and even more complex are the colours in the early 9th century *Book of Kells* now in Trinity College, Dublin [...] An important part of this is due to the folium although this is used differently here to elsewhere. [...] Minimal differences in the application of the folium means that the borders hover between blue and whitish purple-pink with the result that surfaces seem to merge into one another and the colour seems to be fluorescent, floating over the ground, not located on any particular surface." (Roosen-Runge 1977, p. 154)

tion. Possible figures are also present in *Mizar* (although to a lesser extent) and in *Aldebaran* (here to a greater extent). Thus the visual world of *Negativwerte* evokes that wave of hallucination that already fascinated Leonardo when he looked at patchy walls or clouds and mud.

Indeed *Negativwerte* raises the question as to how far we can trust our eyes: in the shifting colours, forms, surfaces and spatial effects, things emerge and recede to an equal degree. This explains the titles *Alkor* and *Mizar* for these are the names of two of the stars in the Plough, which are so close together that they look like a double star. Alkor, not as bright as Mizar, is sometimes called 'the eye test': individuals see it, according to their eyesight, either as part of a double star or as a single star. In fact, Mizar is itself a double star[98] and Alkor is a huge distance away from it. It is not hard to imagine that in the early days of astronomy before the existence of sophisticated optical instruments to confirm findings in the night sky, a phenomenon of this sort must have been a severe irritant – just like the colour phenomena found in Polke's work.

To return once more to the question of colour. Colour changes are the visual point of *Negativwerte*: the viewer witnesses a perpetuum mobile of colour, images glow and darken, spaces break up and surfaces reflect themselves. One might even say that the colour mutations in *Negativwerte* are mimetic, imitating nothing less than living Nature.

The Alchemy of Paint – the Extension of the Concept of Mimesis

The idea that Nature – that is the Nature of natural objects – is inherently in motion, goes back to Aristotle.[99] He defines a natural object as something that contains within it the source of motion and rest,[100] known as 'natura naturans.' At the same time, however, the natural object is affected by motion from outside itself, thus Nature is "the moving moved."[101] Mimesis mediates between 'physis' (Nature) and 'techne' (Art) by, on the one hand, completing what Nature cannot complete and, on the other hand, by imitating what Nature has created. As Aristotle puts it: when a person builds a house they are doing exactly what Nature would do if it could build houses. Thus: 'active Nature' (natura naturans) is the paradigm of all poiesis. Poiesis is the imitation of (poietic) Nature."[102] This equation is only valid in that natural creation – like human creativity (poiesis) – is in fact teleological; that is to say, both follow an inner necessity which, once complete, will reach its own ultimate goal. But this leaves no room for chance.

It is only with the abandonment of the notion of Nature following some overall plan – as Darwin did so radically – that self-propelled motion and chance can be recognised within one and the same natural object. On this basis, it then becomes possible to construct an extended concept of mimesis, where chance and intentional processes can come together in the artwork under the general auspices of an extended imitation of Nature.

98 Double stars constitute one physical system, closely linked by mutual attraction.
99 For details on this see Knobloch 1981
100 Aristotle, Physics, Bl. 129b 13–14
101 Knobloch 1981, p. 21
102 Mittelstraß 1981, p. 44

And this is of central relevance to Polke's *Negativwerte*, as the artist himself has remarked: "It is about the chemical effect of the paint. That is why I included the didactic piece with the flat fish in the *Zeitgeist* catalogue. The flat fish changes its colour according to its surroundings, like a chameleon. We can't do that. We have to rely on the alchemy of the paint, [...] for example, the glow of my violet pictures that you can't just take home with you and yet which does affect the retina and which awakens in us a longing for the unknown mysterium."[103] Thus the alchemy of the paint sets in motion processes that are analogous to the colour processes we find in Nature: these alchemical processes are mimetic without being illustrative.

Changing colours have, of course, always been a telling sign of living Nature. Even today, leaving aside the animal world, the changing colours of the seasons still mean something. And it is no mere coincidence that names of colours are used to designate the various stages of alchemical transmutation. Different colours were taken as evidence of the stage that had been reached at any given point during the alchemical process (the Magnum Opus), which aimed to artificially hasten and complete the natural growth of Nature which was taken to be alive, and possibly even to have a soul.[104] The individual stages of this process of transmutation that was to take place in the alchemist's oven were named after the colours that matched the events concerned: 'blackening, whitening, yellowing and reddening.'[105] In particular the multi-coloured so-called 'peacock's tail' of the final phase of transmutation would be the visible evidence that here Nature was in the highest possible state of activity: for alchemical thinking saw life as "continuous transformation, that always takes places in the same substratum."[106] Titus Burckhardt, in his discussion of the alchemist's view of Nature, puts it as follows: "Nature has many faces. The most immediate of these was seen in the changes that a material could undergo, when it became liquid and then gaseous before re-solidifying, or when a crumbly material became waxy and smooth, when its form was dissolved and suddenly blossomed into crystals, whereby its colour might change. All this pointed to some basic material in the world, that can take on all forms and conditions without, itself, significantly changing and, at the same time, it pointed to the nature of the human soul which may display all kinds of conditions and qualities, all of which are part of its intrinsically ungraspable essence. Thus the alchemist's oven, or even his crucible, reflects in miniature the play of Nature – both physical and psychical – in all its immensity."[107]

In the imitation and completion of Nature the creator – "that is alchymia, bringing to its end, that which has not found its end"[108] – the concept of alchemy coincides with the traditional concept of mimesis. Both concepts presume that Nature is teleological. For Polke, on the other hand – and this point does bear emphasis – process-like colour changes do not occur according to some inner necessity but, depending on the intervention of the artist, are to a lesser or greater extent unpredictable. Thus any discussion of Polke's alchemy must leave behind it certain, substantial, traditionally alchemical notions. Polke's alchemy is better understood as a metaphor. In

103 Quoted in Groot/Heynen 1983, pp. 281/285

104 Gaston Bachelard gives many instances of this view of Nature. May one example suffice here, namely a 17th century alchemist describing the nature of metal: "[...] extracted from the Earth, metal 'is now no longer nourished by it [the Earth], and bears comparison with old, worn out human beings [...] Nature retains the same cycle of birth and death in metals as in plants and animals'." (Bachelard 1978, pp. 234 – 235; see also Ganzenmüller 1938/1967, pp. 146 – 159)

105 See ibid., pp. 81/82 and Thiel 1980, p. 71

106 Ganzenmüller 1938/1967, p. 132

107 Burckhardt 1960, p. 103

108 Paracelsus, quoted in Ganzenmüller 1956, p. 335; see also Telle 1980, col. 330

39 *Regenwetter (Regenbogen)*, 1982/83. Private collection

40 Detail from *Achat*, 1987. Private collection

this more constrained sense, where paint acts like a living, transformable material, the alchemy of the paint is at the same time the mimesis of living Nature.

This aspect of Polke's art was to be seen at its most impressive in the hydro-sensitive works in the German Pavilion in Venice in 1986 [see pp. 254, 255]: the appearance of these works was never fixed, and they derived their particular sensuality and meaning from the actual metamorphosis of the paint itself. In fact the colours of these wall-paintings reflected the atmospheric changes in the lagoon outside. For the substance that Polke used for these works was a solution of cobalt chloride that turns red in humid air and becomes bluish under drier conditions. As Dierk Stemmler puts it: "Nature intervenes [...] directly in the visual process."[109]

Nature also plays a part, albeit a different one, in Polke's 'Schüttbilder' [poured pictures] which he was already making at various times in the mid-70s; this is seen even more clearly in *Schnee und Hagel*, 1982/83 [Snow and Hail: see p. 213], and in *Regenwetter (Regenbogen)*, 1983 [Rainy Weather (Rainbow): illus. 39]. In these works lacquers were poured on to the canvases. These were then rotated with the result that the lacquers spread out at different speeds and in different directions to form and solidify into pools, rivulets and droplets. A similar process is also used in the group of seven gouaches *Ohne Titel (Schüttbilder)*, 1984 [Untitled (Poured Pictures)].[110] And ultimately, a work like *Achat*, 1987 [Agate: illus. 40], presents a multi-branched structure not as though it were some fixed form, but as though it were still in the process of coming into being.

"The moving moved" – that was how Aristotle described the natural object, involved in an on-going process. In a similar sense the formal processes in Polke's works derive from the intrinsic motion of the material in a context initiated by the artist: "the moving moved."

Chance-Led Experiments

It is worth remembering at this point that there was a very similar formal intention behind the experiments that Willi Baumeister, Oskar Schlemmer and Franz Krause carried out between 1940 and 1942 in the paint shops belonging to the industrialist, Dr Herbert, in Wuppertal. The keyword was 'modulation': "everyone knows how fascinating modulations are, for, after all, who has not had fun discovering figures in the veins in a piece of marble or in clouds or in wood grain; who has never gazed into the shimmering colours of a puddle of gas or petrol."[111] Modulation is used here to mean both the chance forms the paint takes and the chance forms of Nature. It is "almost completely independent of the creative intention. It is a Nature experience."[112] The paint experiments in Wuppertal (illus. 41), with results that sometimes seem closely related to Polke's poured pictures, were inspired by Leonardo's well-known advice to look in ashes, in clouds and in mud for what will elevate "the spirit to new feelings."[113] They were also inspired by the *Klexographien* ['Spillographs'] by the poet Justinus Kerner (1786 – 1862) and last of all by the products of 'decalco-

109 Stemmler 1986, n. p.
110 Illus. in exh. cat., Polke, Bonn 1988, p. 180
111 Willi Baumeister and Heinz Rasch, 'Modulation und Patina', in: exh. cat., Wuppertal 1979, n. p.
112 Ibid.
113 Ludwig 1882, I., 66

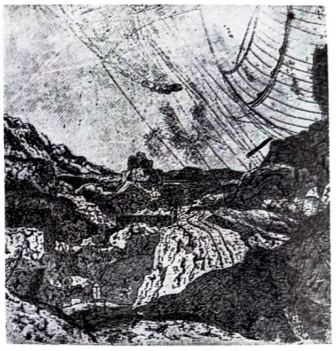
mania' that Schlemmer had found in the June 1936 edition of the Surrealist journal *Minotaur*.

Probably the first artist to make conscious use of chance in this way, was Hercules Seghers (c. 1589 – 1638). Polke counts him as one of his most important points of reference.[114] Unlike Andrea Mantegna (1431 – 1506), who creates an illusion of chance in the open region between cloud formations and cloud forms,[115] in Seghers' work, chance – as a heteronomous, non-assimilable element – destroys the illusionistic coherence of the image. The best known example of this is his engraving *Weg über einer Schlucht* [Path by a Gorge: illus. 42][116] where Seghers takes a fragment of ship's rigging from another engraving and incorporates it into the mountains above the gorge.

With his interest in artistic experiment, giving chance its rebellious head, Seghers proves to be an early kindred spirit of Polke's: "One picture has one effect, the next picture, even with the same elements, will by no means necessarily have the same effect. But I do know that if you sprinkle iron on it then the character is different to when you sprinkle aluminium on it. Iron has a completely different effect to copper, to zinc. And then I also work with tellurium and with apocryphal powders or with other powdered elements, just to see: what will they do [...]? Unpredictability – that's the interesting thing."[117]

Unpredictability is also the theme of Polke's second large wall-painting which he realised in 1989 in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (ARC). The wall, painted with heat-sensitive paint, only reveals its fantastic beauty when a particular temperature is reached. Then apparently homogeneous black metamorphoses into a realm of colour that ranges from vibrant blue, through green and violet right into the unfathomable depths. And here too – as in Venice – a chance-led process coincides as it were with living Nature.

41 Franz Krause, from *Modulation und Patina*, 1941–42

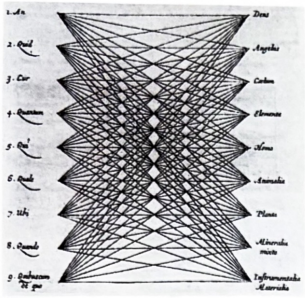


42 Hercules Seghers, *Weg über einer Schlucht*, early to mid 17th century

Magic Squares: a Secret World Order

The potential of this 'coincidence' is an important motivator for Polke's lasting interest in magic and alchemy. The two come together yet again in the seven part series *Magische Quadrate I – VII*, 1992 [Magic Squares I – VII: see pp. 310, 311]. These go back to the cosmology of Ptolemy (c. 100 – 160 AD) who believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and was surrounded by seven spheres of ether. Gnostic mythology, accepting the parallelism of the microcosm and the macrocosm, describes the influence of the planets on the formation of metals: "The assumption was that individual metals are various stages in the formation of one and the same basic material, which is in the process of reaching its ultimate stage, namely gold."[118] According to this system Saturn corresponded to lead, Jupiter to tin, Mars to iron, Venus to copper, Mercury to quicksilver, Luna to silver and Sol to gold. Any such notions of the mystic-numerical significance of planets and metals went back to Pythagoras who saw the number as the essence of all things: "The essence of things,

114 In conversation with Suzanne Pagé, exh. cat., Polke, Paris 1988, p. 8
115 See Janson 1961
116 Version I, HB 17 IIb, illus. in: Rowlands 1980
117 Schmidt-Wulffen 1988, p. 70
118 Roob 1996, p. 19; see also Telle 1980, col. 337ff. and Thiel 1980, pp. 70ff.



43 Athanasius Kircher, from *Ars magna sciendi*, Amsterdam, 1669

the ordering of the world is itself no more than the ordering of numbers [...] The [...] mathematical thinking of the Pythagoreans, however, does not refer exclusively – as in modern science – to quantitative relationships: on the contrary, since all things are seen as related to numbers, and can thus be understood as concentrated numbers, then it must also be possible to express qualities in numerical terms. And, vice versa, numbers acquire qualitative significance beyond their numerical significance, not only as arithmetical amounts but also as geometric figures."[119]

And in fact Polke does superimpose geometric figures on the number squares, although none that might be found in any textbook. Instead Polke hit upon the idea of linking the numbers in a numerical sequence. The results are startling because in their harmonious correlations they are distinctly similar to mathematical number sequences found elsewhere. It looks for all the world as though Polke has almost managed to track down the secret order that holds the Pythagorean universe together. In addition, the pictures are painted with seemingly metallic, iridescent colours that recall the old connections between planets and metals. Sometimes the numbers shimmer more brightly, sometimes it is the background – depending on where the viewer is standing. And the result is that one panel seems to emerge from the next, in the same way that all the different networks of the lineature seem to be part of one whole – reminiscent of the link that some writers have made between the planets, seven in number, and the seven stages of the alchemical process.

In some ways therefore, it might seem that here a magical world order is being constructed that is diametrically opposed to the scientific world order. Laszlo Glozer describes this as "found facts against the principle of usefulness ... resistance, not agitatory, but as the result of primarily artistic basic research – at the high point of our own impenetrable age."[120] This is entirely in keeping with the fact that number squares were originally credited with healing powers. For example, the magic square in Dürer's *Melancholia I*, 1514, symbolising the influence of Jupiter, has this iatro-mathematical meaning.[121]

The logic of these magic squares becomes more apparent if one takes into account the fact that Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680), following in the footsteps of Raimundus Lullus, developed a universal scheme (illus. 43) according to which Creation is "a web of structural analogies and correspondences," a combinatory act and a "process of multiplying by means of endless permutations [...]."[122] In fact the graphic schema explaining these processes is astonishingly similar to the figures in Polke's own works. It may therefore be concluded that the workings of Nature are expressed in his magic squares in an adequate manner, but at the same time in a previously undreamt-of manner: as magic permutations of colour, numbers and advanced geometry within the overall context of the macrocosm. And yet nothing is actually fixed in this cosmology which effortlessly takes on board Postmodern thinking as well: everything in these works is dependent on individual viewpoint, perception and comprehension – relying on the artist as inventor and on the viewer as explorer.

119 Ernst Bloch, quoted in Gebelein 1991, p. 129
120 Glozer 1992
121 See Klibansky/Panofsky/Saxl 1992, pp. 459ff.
122 Roob 1996, p. 289

7. Nature and History

The *Laterna Magica* involves a double perspective, things are subjected to re-vision. Similarly, the large-scale themes that have occupied Polke since the 80s, also involve a double perspective. These themes are Nature and History.

Not that these themes sprang from some sudden inspiration. From the outset Sigmar Polke has been alert to his own times, as readily found prowling about in the lowlands of the trivial as analysing the deceptions of our mediated, reified consumer world as reflecting on his own artistic activity in the light of the now historical myth of high art.

However, it is only following his new awareness of paint as a material, acquired during and directly after his travels in 1980/81, that Nature comes into play as a theme. Alchemy, in itself central to any hylozoistic concept of Nature, presents itself as a welcome catalyst. Yet the more evident his interest in Nature, the more evident his interest in politics as a dialectical balance.

Let us start in the late 70s where *Dr. Bonn,* 1978 [see p. 175], stands out as a distinctly political commentary. On 18 October 1977, in the solitary confinement wing of the Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart, the bodies of the terrorists Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe were found – a strange and, to this day, never satisfactorily explained occurrence in the history of the judicial system in post-war Germany. Alluding to this, Polke painted a faceless bureaucrat caught in a glaring light, writing a report of these events under the gaze of portraits of Baader and Raspe. Having more than filled his wastepaper basket with crumpled rejects, in the end he places a taut catapult on his forehead to help him to do justice to the search for truth.

Such unfiltered glimpses of Federal reality are far and few between in Polke's work. It is not until the exhibition *Transit* in Schwerin in 1996 that Polke produces political work of comparable immediacy, in this case addressing German-German themes showing, for example, Erich Honecker's urn (*Ohne Titel*, 1996 [Untitled]) or the fruits of socialism as it really was (*Murphy Schnauzer*, 1996; illus. 44). As a rule his commentaries are somewhat more reserved and political themes are handled on a historical level.

On 9 August 1981, three days after the 36th anniversary of Hiroshima, President Reagan announced that the neutron bomb was going into production – a decision that caused dismay and outrage even amongst his European allies, because it seemed that this step was one step closer to the possibility of nuclear war. And indeed at the time the spectre of a nuclear war that could be confined to European soil was sighted in the Pentagon's corridors of power.[123] Shortly before this Reagan had secured funding for neutron armaments production by winning Congress's approval for swingeing cuts in the welfare budget. Polke addresses the problem in his five part work, *Reagan 1–3, Das Problem Europa, Sargdeckel*, 1981 [Reagan 1–3, The Problem of Europe, Coffin Lid: see pp. 250, 251], using a photograph from the front

44 *Murphy Schnauzer*, 1996. Private collection

123 See the *Spiegel* cover story 'Reagans Neutronen-Schock. Schlachtfeld Deutschland', *Der Spiegel,* no. 34/17, 8 (1981), pp. 17–29

45 *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imp.)*, 1983. Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart

page of *Welt am Sonntag* on 9 August 1981. Unaware of the impending 'neutron shock' this picture, taken directly after the cuts to the welfare budget had been agreed, shows the President with a drawing he had made of himself.[124] This photograph is repeatedly photocopied and *Reagan 1 – 3* shows three stages in this process during which the double image of the President gradually dissolves. In the third picture the vanishing outline merges into a red and white glowing ground: a vision of nuclear destruction. In the fourth picture Polke incorporates the myth of the Rape of Europa which now suddenly acquires new relevance. Finally, *Sargdeckel* brings the whole to a concise and significant conclusion.

It is perhaps worth adding here that shortly after this Joseph Beuys was one of the performers on a record with the title *Sonne statt Reagan* [Sun instead of Reagan]: a word-play on the American President's name which sounds like 'Regen' meaning 'rain' in German. The title was later used as a slogan for the massive peace demonstrations in Bonn on 10 June 1982.

Polyvalent Pictorial Processes

It was at this time that Polke painted *Lager*, 1982 [Camp: see p. 249]. This is the first work where a political theme is portrayed using the same techniques as in the 'alchemical' works. The electrified barbed wire fence of Auschwitz is the subject, but the picture carrier was first treated with spillages of pigment and charcoal. In Polke's own words: "It's a picture about telling a story, a picture about passing on rumours, for I have never experienced a bomb attack. But I understood emotionally what it was about from being told. [...] The camp, the fenced-in space, the boundaries, it is all there down to the last detail, even down to the charcoal. Painting with a glowing ember, the canvas began to glow, steamed."[125]

In these remarks it becomes clear once more that the pictorial processes are indeed polyvalent. Where one picture is concerned with the unpredictability of natural-evolutionary processes, another may use the same methods as a catalyst to bring a political theme to life.

This can be seen equally well in the various versions of *Hochsitz*, 1984–1988 [Hunting Tower: see p. 243], where silver nitrate and silver bromide turn the forester's vantage point into the watchtower of a totalitarian regime.

The holocaust as a theme continues to occupy Polke, whether in the shape of the apparently indifferent crowd waiting outside the exhibition that perhaps provoked the first ever coincidence of art and blatant demagogy (*Entartete Kunst*, 1983 [Degenerate Art]) or whether in the picture *LTI*, 1983 (illus. 45). If one did not know the title, *LTI* might certainly be read on analogy with other chance-led, natural process works: the picture carrier has had layer upon layer of lacquer poured on to it, which have drawn together to form a black-brown cloud of indeterminate depth. But the title, incorporated as an abbreviation into the work itself sounds the alert. It refers to the book by the social commentator and critic, Victor Klemperer,

124 This means that, although up until now this work has consistently been listed in catalogues with 1908 as the date, this is clearly wrong.

125 Parkett, no. 26 (1990), p. 17

with its detailed and revelatory examination of the language of fascism in all its ramifications, whether in official speeches or in the apparently innocuous language of individual members of society. Seen in this light the picture is transformed and the process of transformation resembles the revelatory and self-reflective nature of Klemperer's analysis. In Klemperer's own words: "Books and papers, the language of authority and official forms – everything was swimming in the same brown soup [..]."[126] Thus Polke's picture becomes, at one and the same time, an *a posteriori* menetekel and a warning to the 'late born.'

The Availability of the World – the Non-Availability of the Picture

It should not be forgotten that all these works were being produced at the same time as Polke's experiments with paint substances and picture carriers. These latter works were above all a response to the impulse to introduce the unimaginable and the unsayable into the realms of the possible, that are opened up by the category 'picture.' "What would actually happen if..." could be the motto of Polke's determination to go on pushing back the boundaries of what a picture can do. As this essay has already shown, this then sets in motion evolutionary processes that imitate the processes of living, 'poietic' Nature, right up to the level of the macrocosm. This necessarily also involves a temporal horizon that contemporary society has largely banished to the outer reaches of its awareness. Natural time is of course still familiar to us as the welcome or unwelcome return of the summer and winter, day and night.

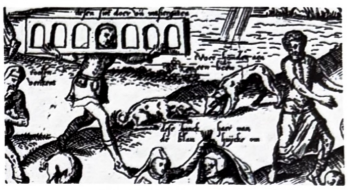
This cycle is, however, increasingly becoming a nuisance – unavoidable yet extraneous – because everything is geared towards the goals that society sets itself: these operate on their own time scale and are only minimally determined by the rhythms of natural time. Countless instruments and devices have been invented to break through the rhythms of natural time, to render it meaningless. For example, Virilio reports that "on 31 December 1976, 40 Americans flew to Paris and disembarked simply in order to celebrate New Year's Eve there, then took off in Concorde to celebrate New Year's Eve on board before landing in Washington to celebrate New Year's Eve in the French Embassy there..."[127] Global transport and communications networks have long since developed their own time and rhythms. Everything is supposed to be available all the time all over the world.

Whenever Polke, on the other hand, allows chance to play a part in the genesis of his works, then the world of images proves to be 'non-available.' This could not be more clearly demonstrated than on the conch wall in the Pavilion in Venice. Given that, in this case, the 'image' is already a thing of chance and as such, unfixed, then this non-availability is heightened by the cycle of day and night, of warmth and cold. Here natural time in fact serves as the *movens* and catalyst for all the various metamorphoses that the picture undergoes. The picture positioned opposite the conch wall presents an anti-world to the latter. Viewers find them-

126 Klemperer 1996, p. 18
127 Virilio 1989, p. 129

selves witnessing a police identity check, as found the world over. *Sieht man ja, was es ist* 1984 [You can see what it is: see p. 253]: a black and white raster picture like an enlarged reportage shot that could hardly be more sober: an arrested image. The control mechanisms being peddled here point towards a concept of time that is dialectically opposed to hydro-painting: a concept of time "as the heteronomous ordering of bourgeois obligation."[128] The fact that Polke took this motif from an Italian film that was distributed in Germany with the title *Keine Zeit für Wunder* [No Time for Miracles][129] not only demonstrates Polke's roguish irony once again, for, more importantly, the picture itself is symbolic, like *Amerikanisch-Mexikanische Grenze* [American-Mexican Border: see p. 252] from the same year. It tells the viewer that all things unpreconceivable and wonderful, as in the wall painting, may only be viewed within the context of the political forces that undeniably govern us; and, vice versa, that only those who open their eyes to the unpreconceivable as a real possibility will be able to free themselves from this sad reality.

46 *Neid und Habgier II (Zwei Hunde und ein Knochen kommen selten zu einer Einigung)*, 1985. Kunsthaus Zürich



47 Detail from Frans Hogenberg, *Die Blau Huicke*, 1558

Global Horizon

A similar global view is found in the picture *Neid und Habgier II (Zwei Hunde und ein Knochen kommen nicht leicht zu einer Einigung)*, 1985 [Envy and Avarice II (Two Dogs and a Bone do not Easily Reach Agreement): illus. 46], which was also in the German Pavilion at Venice. Two stocky dogs, painted as screen dot images, are tugging at a bone. Beyond and through their bodies runs the horizon, above which a gigantic, eerie expanse of sky seems to open up. The picture's few motifs go back to whole variety of sources. The tugging dogs may well go back to an engraving [illus. 47] published in 1558 with the title: *Der blaue Mantel wird dies meist genannt, doch als Torheiten der Welt wäre es besser bekannt* [The blue coat is what this is mostly called, but a better name were the follies of the world]. From there the dogs found their way into Pieter Breugel's *Niederländische Sprichwörter*, 1559 [Netherlandish Sayings], which depicts a topsy-turvy world, ruled by envy (invidia) and avarice (avaritia), by self-deception and hypocrisy. At the same time, Polke's picture ground evokes thoughts of Dürer's watercolour *Traumgesicht*, 1525 [Face in a Dream]. The whole apocalyptic scene has often been interpreted in the light of contemporary experience as a "vision of nuclear destruction"[130] In Polke's work, Dürer's columns of water have become mighty showers of ash.

Neid und Habgier II was of course produced during a time of feverish re-armament, when the phantasmagoria of world-enveloping star wars were terrifyingly able to mobilise an all too real stock-pile of weapons.[131] This global horizon is reflected in the picture. It seems all the more uncanny because of the beguiling, although completely artificial, beauty of the colours accompanying whatever it is – something that defies comprehension – that is breaking over the scene in the background – evidently unnoticed by the dogs although they have clearly sparked it off:

128 Zimmermann 1982, p. 141
129 *Keine Zeit für Wunder*, directed by Luigi Comencini, France/Italy 1982
130 Berger 1985, including a reproduction of Dürer's watercolour
131 See *Der Spiegel*, no. 11 (1985), pp. 120 – 148

an atmosphere to take one's breath away. The realms of colour that emerge here, in this particular form, may again be read as a counterpart to the wall-painting in the apse. The potential of Creation faces the potential of destruction, and Polke shows himself to be the contemporary artist that he is, by the way that the two seem to complement each other in the manner of a 'concordia discors.'

In Venice, Nature and history were put into the same melting pot, which Polke then called *Athanor* after the oven used by alchemists for its capacity to maintain a steady fire over an extended period of time. The title indicated that the works in the Pavilion were still in the making. That is to say: Polke is far from proposing some peaceful reconciliation between Nature and history. On the contrary, the very polarisation of their qualities reveals Polke's own Utopia, where Nature comprises a higher and more comprehensive form of reason than does history.

Indeed Polke is more than critical of historical 'reason' elsewhere too. In 1988 the whole of France was joining in the general jubilation on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution that had established bourgeois principles on the basis of social 'reason'. Polke created a cycle of wholly pessimistic pictures in response to this. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, 1988 [see p. 275] – the title of one of the works in this cycle – are seen as the spawn of a brutal form of violence that crushes human beings underfoot.

On the other hand, in the same year Polke also painted a cycle that holds out some kind of a wishful dream, or even promise, against his earlier bitter reconstruction of history. His homage to the indigenous people of North America, *The Spirits that Lend Strength are Invisible*, 1988,[132] uses tellurium, nickel, silver and meteor dust and, as Thomas McEvilley has shown, points to the possibility of incorporating "Nature into culture as a potentially healing force."[133]

Nature and civilisation come directly up against each other on the back and the front of the picture *Jeep*, 1992 [see p. 302], with a wooden veneer glued to the back, and when this happens, Nature is not seen as the cyclical phenomenon as in Venice and in *The Spirits...*, but instead as having been degraded for the purposes of Capitalist exploitation: Nature that has literally been split apart and divided up in terms of value for money.

The counterpart to this on the human level is found in the picture *Flüchtende*, 1992 [Refugees: see p. 280]: people, clutching their few possessions try to cross a border which is, however, tragically inscribed into their own bodies.[134] Another example might be the picture *Flüchtlingslager*, 1994 [Refugee Camp: see p. 281]: families behind barbed wire sitting out their lives in a hutment – individual incidents and episodes in a time of mass exodus and ethnic wars where the persecution of minorities is the order of the day.

In his treatment of these themes Polke's use of colour is particularly significant. On the back of the translucent picture carrier of *Flüchtlingslager* mighty pools of dark violet, green, yellow and red paint show through to the front to a greater or

132 Illus. in: exh. cat., Polke, San Francisco 1990, nos 65 – 69
133 McEvilley 1991, p. 52
134 See Tosatto 1994, pp. 19, 87

lesser degree – in places the paint still seems to be in motion while in other places it has already solidified into dull or glowing pools of colour. Although the paint is apparently autonomous, independent of the rastered motif, it does nevertheless of course intervene in the actual scenario just as the representational motif affects the way the colour is read. Thus paint and colour take on many meanings: heaven and dirt, hope and despair, mild light and murky light, remembering and forgetting. Indeed, colour lends identity to an unidentifiable location, which now could be mistaken for none other.

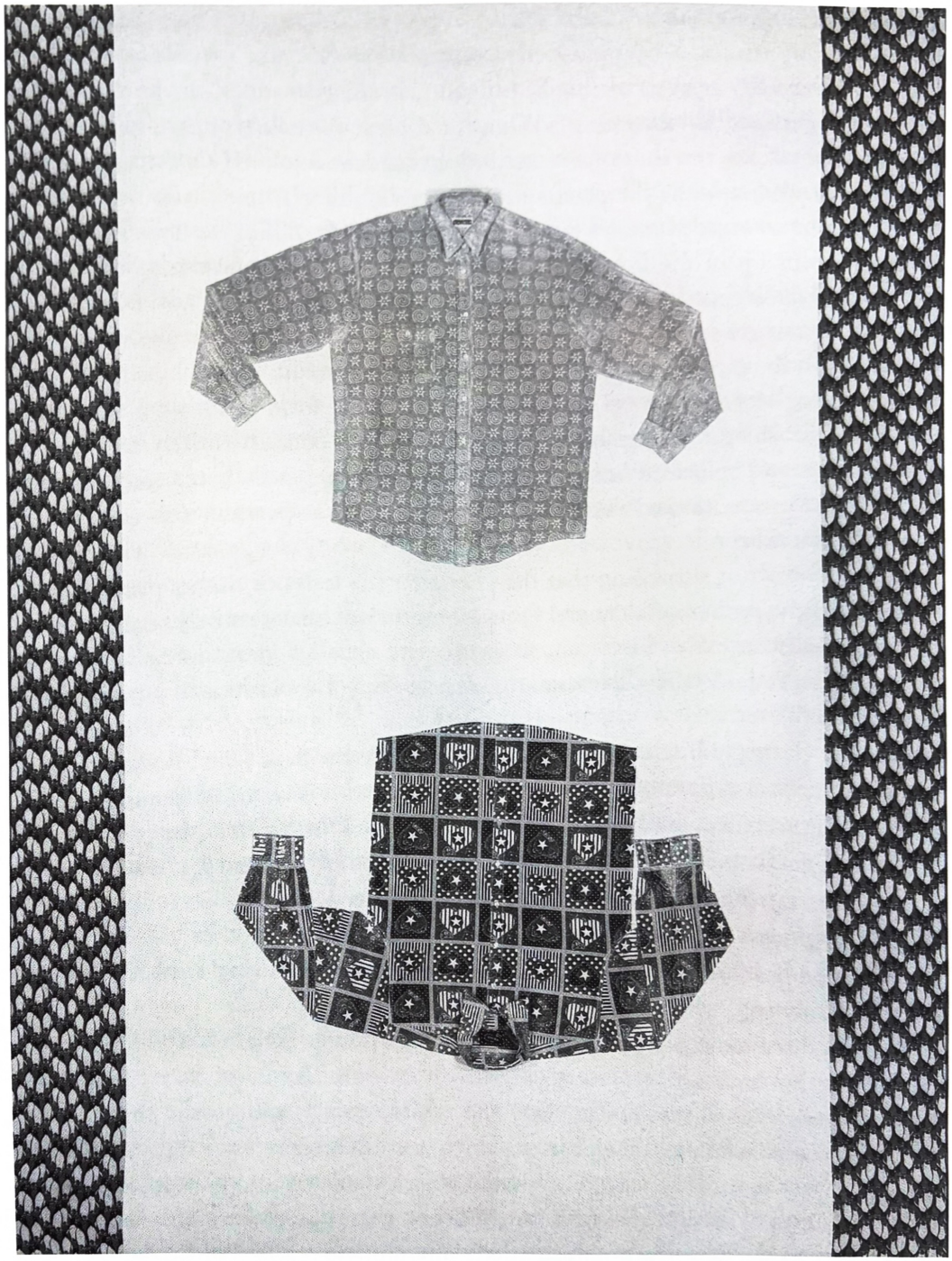
The ambivalence of the readings that emerge from paint spillages and self-propelled paint trails is not in any way lessened by the use of rastering grids. Whilst in the 60s the raster functioned primarily as a structured mediator, more recently Polke has been developing its potential to convey the numinous.

The vast picture *Marienerscheinung*, 1994 [Vision of Mary: see p. 313], is already moving in this direction. What does the raster depict? It is possible to make out the schematic edge of the wall of a building and, even less distinct, there is an oval shape that seems to flow across the whole picture like some kind of ectoplasm. One might imagine that the shapes at the lower edge of the picture are figures seen from behind, perhaps reminiscent of the figures in Caspar David Friedrich's works – caught up in the spectacle of Nature. Yet any hints of figurative imagery are constantly on the verge of slipping away, chimeras emerge only to vanish again instantly. Thus the raster operates paradoxically just like the colour spillages where strange shapes and grimaces break out of the structures created by the movement of the paint.

A raster can also be used to convey imagination mingled with memory as in *Ziegenwagen*, 1992 [Goat Cart: see p. 305]. Against a ground of motifs from 50s fabrics a raster motif emerges, open-ended and without closure: memories of a childhood characterised by simplicity which – however irretrievable it may seem – is nevertheless firmly anchored in the collective consciousness.

The gently pleading tone of this work clearly has a counterweight in the cold exposure of that same ideology in *Gemeinschaftswerk Aufschwung Ost*, 1992 [Joint Project Upswing East: see p. 277]. This was the time in Germany where the real dichotomy of the slogan of reunification ('Aufschwung Ost') became all too evident; a time of growing mass-unemployment, of unbridgeable ideological differences and of Capitalist speculation that smacked of the early days of industrialisation. Polke reacted to this by using allegory to depict work and capital, as in the fabric pictures where, for the first time, entire shirts and trousers are worked into the whole.

Zwei Hemden, 1994 [Two Shirts: illus. 48], is an example of this. On each side of the picture there are two strips of penguin pattern, running in the opposite direction to each other, in keeping with the two shirts, one upside down and the other the right way up. The ordering of the picture displays a double dialectic. On the one hand, two shirts are set against each other with designs that speak of the promises of



48 *Zwei Hemden*, 1994.
Private collection

happiness that shops use to bamboozle the people in the street – two shirts, clearly related yet appealing to quite different tastes: West Germany meets East Germany and vice versa. On the other hand, penguins, in their 'tuxedos', invariably call to mind thoughts of the ruling classes. Thus the continuous bands of pattern to left and to right demarcate the shirts' permitted room for manoeuvre. This then reveals the picture's meaning: while the person-in-the-street is still grappling with the ideological and cultural imponderables that have arisen from the fall of the wall, he or she is already swept up in the flow of capital in both directions which pays no heed to ideological differences. And yet at the same time, this work may also be read as a homage to those ordinary people, and in this sense the isolated positioning of the two shirts in the picture space lends them a positively heroic aspect. In another work in this series, *Mercedes*, 1994 [see p. 282], this heroic form is taken up again. One single 'rustic' shirt is set against a fabric pattern that consists entirely of Mercedes stars. Above and below: Work and Capital are seen here in the same relationship as in the depictions from the Peasants' Wars which show the peasants above the church and the aristocracy.

It is by now not surprising that the year after his series of clothes pictures Polke returned to the realms of alchemy. On the contrary, it seems entirely cogent in view of the overall context of his recent work; cogent since his forays into society's past and present require the dialectical balance of his Utopian view of non-reified Nature.

For the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1995, Polke produced a four picture series (winning the Jury Prize along with Richard Artschwager) dedicated to the mythical founder of alchemy, *Hermes Trismegistos* [see p. 316]. The basic motif is taken from a floor mosaic in the Cathedral in Siena. It show the magus granting the Egyptians the gift of writing and jurisprudence. It is accompanied by a Latin inscription: "God, the Creator of all things, created another visible god and that was the first god that he created and the only one to bring Him joy: and He loved His only son, who there is called the Holy Word."

For the three main pictures in this series, Polke poured paint over the entire rear surface of the translucent picture carriers. The combination of water-based and water-resistant paints resulted in veins and faults, streaks and cracks that seem to evoke the sense of an on-going process, which in turn interprets the representational scenario. Although the series has only one subject, depicted in a variety of different ways, in fact the viewer witnesses a 'colour event' that is greater than the sum of the parts of the cycle, and which in turn affects any motivic reading of the whole. Seen in its entirety, the cycle points towards the *magnum opus*, the transmutation and purification processes of alchemy, during the course of which colour goes from black through white to red. The individual steps of this process are described in alchemical terms as chemical stages in the completion of Nature and as spiritual stages in the purification of the soul.[135] The last picture in the series which focuses

135 See Gebelein 1991, pp. 45ff.

solely on Hermes Trismegistos, thus elevated to the level of portraiture, seems to be a concentrated version of this process of transformation: black and red paint spillages mingle to create a constellation of colour that is to be read on a cosmological level. The relationship of above and below, of the front and the back of the picture seems to embody that all-embracing interconnection described in the *Tabula Smaragdina* which is attributed to Hermes Trismegistos: "Everything that is above is like everything that is below and everything that is below is like everything that is above, that the secret of unity may fulfil itself."[136]

How can one explain Polke's persistent interest in alchemy through the years when it is dismissed by scientists as esoteric and hence socially irrelevant? Leaving aside the fact that the chemical knowledge that was employed in the practice of alchemy is couched in such hermetic language as to be only partially comprehensible, nevertheless alchemy still, even now, comprises a grand design for life. Alchemy presents a model of a syncretic science embracing hermetic teachings, cabala, non-denominational Christianity, medicine, astronomy and mechanics, all united under its wing, and it was only ousted by the advent of modern science with its insistence on quantification.

Nowadays, the notion of scientific progress has developed noticable fault lines and in itself is becoming a visible social problem, in that it openly countenances the global destruction of all living things. It is against this backdrop that "dreamed knowledge"[137] – recognising the macrocosm in the microcosm – arises like a phoenix from the ashes. Thus the connections between alchemy and chaos theory are already incalculable. Alchemy is like the paradigm of a world-embracing project, still to be defined as yet, but which would be directed towards reclaiming Nature. Only once this had been achieved could there be any reconciliation between Nature and history.

Sigmar Polke opens up the portals leading in this direction, by providing dreamed pictures for the dreaming eye, which alone can make this project happen.

The Two Eyes of Irony

Polke's œuvre since the 80s is notable in two respects: on the one hand Polke emerges as a tireless experimenter, intent on driving painting beyond the bounds of convention into barely charted territory. 'Terra incognita' was the term used in old maps and the many tales that told how a person first set foot in a wholly unknown land give an idea of the quaking and sense of adventure that accompanied such a step. The alchemist, too, was entering terra incognita when he set about adding new substances and transforming a known solution, without having the slightest idea as to the outcome. This spirit lives on in Polke in the moment when he avails himself of materials that have long since been declared obsolete by our highly sophisticated paint industry and by current teachings on the techniques of painting alike, or, if not obsolete, toxic and to be avoided at all costs. The freedom to ignore all of this, goes

136 Quoted in Eliade 1994, vol. 3/1, p. 243
137 Ibid., p. 248

hand in hand with the freedom to give chance free reign. Thus the adventure of terra incognita is simply transposed into the pictorial process: a terrain that discovers itself in the proper motion of tinctures, lacquers and pigment and which in its transformability and unpredictability comes close to the volatility of the processuality of creative Nature, which, as we know, is always incalculable to a certain degree. Meanwhile the territory of the picture becomes a place where the chaos from the beginning of time returns in order to unfold its creative potential. The direction that this potential will take is only vaguely identifiable. However, it is clearly not Polke's intention to 'occupy' this unknown territory and to subject it to his rule, but to disseminate his own experience of the unforeseeable, holding the picture – the terrain – open for whatever might happen, for the *possible*.

Polke took a decisive step when he opened up the picture carrier from both sides – front and back – so that the two-sided painting and the picture carrier would become one by osmosis. "I wanted to create a mirror using lacquer" – Polke's own description of his early work on transparents – "where you stand in front of it and see what is behind you. The next thing is: while you are seeing what is behind you, you are thinking about what is in front of you, but which you can't see. For the illusion is already perfectly there."[138]

This 'experimental set-up' as the artist himself calls it resolves the prospective potency that is inherent in the picture as a planimetric projection surface. And, in a countermove, it also opens up the possibility of a *reversed process of seeing*. It is as though Polke foreshortens the view through the 'open window' of the picture to such an extent that one's gaze gets caught in the window pane itself. The process of seeing is not directed towards what is behind the glass but instead towards the space where the painter is and which is reflected in the pane. Thus the viewer is confronted with a reversal of perspective where the reflection of one's own seeing becomes the subject of the painting.

On the other hand – as is clear from Polke's remarks – in this experiment the observation of the lacquer surfaces conflates with the imaginative seeing that the lacquer painting instigates. Thus as soon as the painter sets about representing the shapes of the room that he sees in the reflective surface of the picture, the picture inexorably turns into a prospective scenario. But on the way there, the eye is subjected to the highest possible tension, which tests the eyes' resistance to the utmost. This tension is the result of the superimposition of the reflection of the room on its own perception. At this point *perceptive* and *imaginative* seeing divide and mingle at one and the same time.

Thus the picture is no longer a view, a window or a mirror, yet all these modalities seem meanwhile to have come together in the picture itself. For the first time in the history of painting the picture presents itself as only loosely connected to its own picture carrier. And the picture carrier becomes completely porous: open to real space. That is one side of the coin.

138 Sigmar Polke in conversation with the author on December 19, 1994

The other is that Polke is a critical observer of his own times, constantly collecting up debris and saving it in his own pictures which form little eddies in the current of forgetting that increases with each successive event in the politics of the day.

Where, we have to ask, is the *tertium comparationis* of this polarisation? The answer lies in Polke's ironic relationship to the world. Peter Szondi has shown that in the case of the Romantics, their irony was based on their view of their own times as a "period of historical and philosophical transition [...] of no-longer and not-yet, the negativity of which only made sense in terms of the remembered thesis of the past and their sense of a future Utopian synthesis."[139] Thus, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it in the 116th Athaneum Fragment: Romantic poetry is "still in the process of becoming; indeed that is its very essence, that it is eternally only becoming, can never be complete."[140] Fragments were the preferred form amongst Romantic writers, and were themselves not seen "as what had not yet been achieved, as something that had never been more than a fragment, but rather as anticipation and promise."[141] And, as Szondi shows in his discussion of Tieck's comedies, drama was the form in which the early Romantics realised "what can only ever be a goal in real life: the connection between being-in-this-world and standing-above-this-world."[142]

In Kierkegaard's words: "On the one side stands the given reality with all its paltry philistinism; on the other, the ideal actuality with all its dimly emerging shapes."[143] This sense of discrepancy is the basis of Romantic irony – hence, Friedrich Schlegel's paradigmatic declaration: "It [irony] contains and creates a sense of the inextinguishable conflict of the unconstrained and the constrained, of the impossibility and necessity of complete communication."[144]

Of course it would be going too far if one were to apply precisely this eschatological aspect of the historical and philosophical constructs of Romantic thinking to the works by Polke that are nourished by the 'alchemy of paint.' Without crossing the threshold to the realms of idealised reality, Polke's works point towards exactly that lack of constraint that Schlegel talks of – insofar as their processuality means that they are constantly re-organising and dis-organising and thereby eluding any final definition or predictability. And, conversely, in the encounter between 'alchemistic' and political images we are at the same time referred back to the constraints, that today express themselves in the repressive power of the militaristic-industrial-scientific power structures currently bent on a programme of universal social control.

Seen in this light it is clear that Polke's 'alchemistic' and political works are dialectically mutually illuminating. But the driving force behind this dialectic is irony. Thus Oskar Becker, developing Solger's concept of irony, talks of the two eyes of irony: the 'waking,' 'sober' eye destroys what it sees by critically rendering the present 'absent,' that is, distances itself from the present; on the other hand, the second of the two eyes of irony is a 'dreaming' eye, floating up above everything.[145] And indeed, in order to do Polke's recent works justice, the viewer must regard them with these two eyes, taking equal note of the real and the possible.

139 Szondi 1964, p. 6
140 Schlegel 1958ff. vol. 2, p. 183
141 Szondi 1964, p. 13
142 Ibid., p. 22
143 Kierkegaard 1989, pp. 304f.
144 Schlegel 1958ff., vol. 2, p. 160 (Lyceumsfragment no. 108)
145 See Becker 1929, pp. 50f.

Fragmentary Consciousness – the Combinatory Spirit

"Who, what is Sigmar Polke?" – this was the question posed by Barbara Reise in her essay of the same name.[146] In his *Selbstbildnis*, 1971 [Self Portrait: illus. 49], Polke enigmatically presents himself as Janus, the Roman god who absorbs contradiction and at the same time symbolises the unity of the past and the future: a high aim to set oneself. In addition to this, Janus also connects the sun and the moon, male and female and, in that sense, has about him something of the androgynous human form that was to be recreated in the 'conjunctio' of alchemy. Thus Janus may also be equated with the primal chaos that Schelling referred to.[147] The materia prima of chaos contains within it the potential creation of the world, which leads Nietzsche to his comment that "one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."[148] The concept of chaos "in the name of the persistently different, mulitfariously-individual, sues the false unification and reduction of plurality for the right of existence of transitions and border-crossings."[149] At every turn we see Polke as someone who lives on the edge: on the border between high and low culture, good and bad taste, the sublime and the ridiculous, Nature and civilisation. He is the artist who tills the alluvial soil of our cultural inheritance, gathering up any cultural detritus as he goes. And he does this with a degree of wit. For, as Friedrich Schlegel tells us, wit is a combinatory spirit, consisting in the "ability to detect the similarities between objects that are otherwise very independent, different and separate [...]."[150]

As does alchemy, so, too, does wit dissolve spiritual materials at the same time as acting as a binding agent. In light of this, it is surprisingly capricious and unpredictable, "a flash of lightning from the subconscious world which always exists for us alongside the conscious world, and which, by this means, aptly demonstrates the *fragmentary nature of our consciousness.*"[151]

In Polke's work the fragmentary broadens out into an awareness of heterogeneity, polyperspectivity and multivalence. In pictorial terms it leads to metamorphoses, where everything real could intrinsically be something other: this demonstrably applies equally to screen dot works, fabric works, spillage pictures and transparents. The alchemy of paint is inherently metamorphic.

But where one thing can become another, then the result is a kind of *magia naturalis*,[152] a world where everything is interconnected. If this was originally a concept expressing the fundamental unity of all things, in Polke's work it becomes an expression of fragmentary absent-mindedness. It is the absent-mindedness that the ironist seeks who is said to have an encyclopaedic interest in all things and all forms. This interest is paired with scepticism, a degree of reservation in the face of all things and all forms, above all in the face of the vocabulary of closure that is validated by metaphysics. The ironist does not assume that "there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances."[153] Thus he places pictorial elements in a mid-way state of transformability.

146 Reise 1976/77
147 Schelling 1973, pp. 603ff.
148 Nietzsche 1909, p. 12
149 Scobel 1989, p. 284
150 Quoted in Best 1989, p. 79
151 Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in ibid, p. 76 (author's italics)
152 See Crary 1990
153 Rorty 1989, p. 74

49 *Selbstbildnis*, 1971

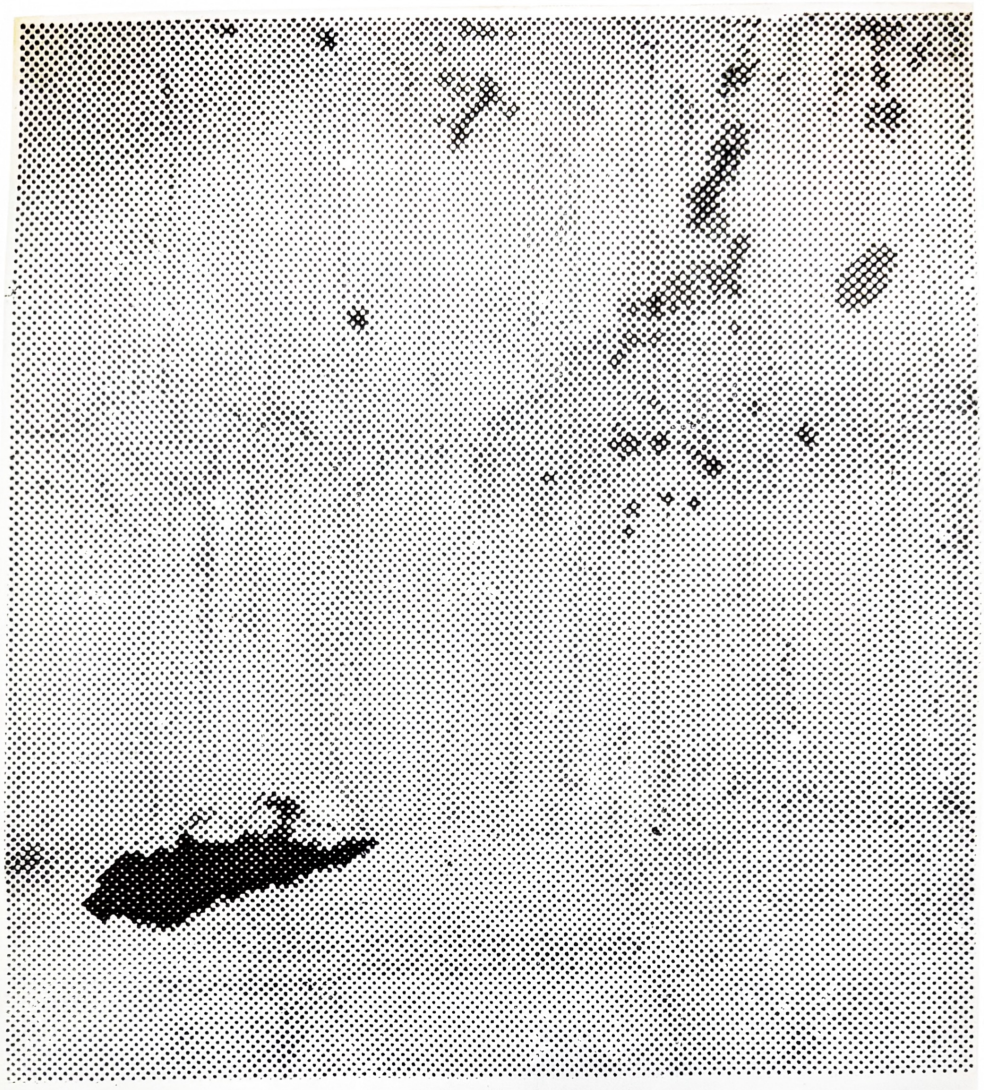
Reservation and interest combine to nurture a world of radical plurality, namely the 'condition postmoderne.' In an anticipation of Postmodern philosophy, Novalis states that "pluralism is our innermost being and perhaps every person has their own part in what I think and do, as do I in the thoughts of other people."[154]

This is the basis on which Sigmar Polke included himself in *Fotokreis (Menschenkreis)*, 1968. In an interview two years earlier he had already provided food for thought: "You see, I have so to speak split myself apart in order not to be unfair to myself nor to those outside of myself, nor to somehow oppress them. Perhaps everything will come back together again sometime, I can't say, I am quite happy about this kind of many-sidedness, I am happy that I don't just see black and white, but both at once."[155]

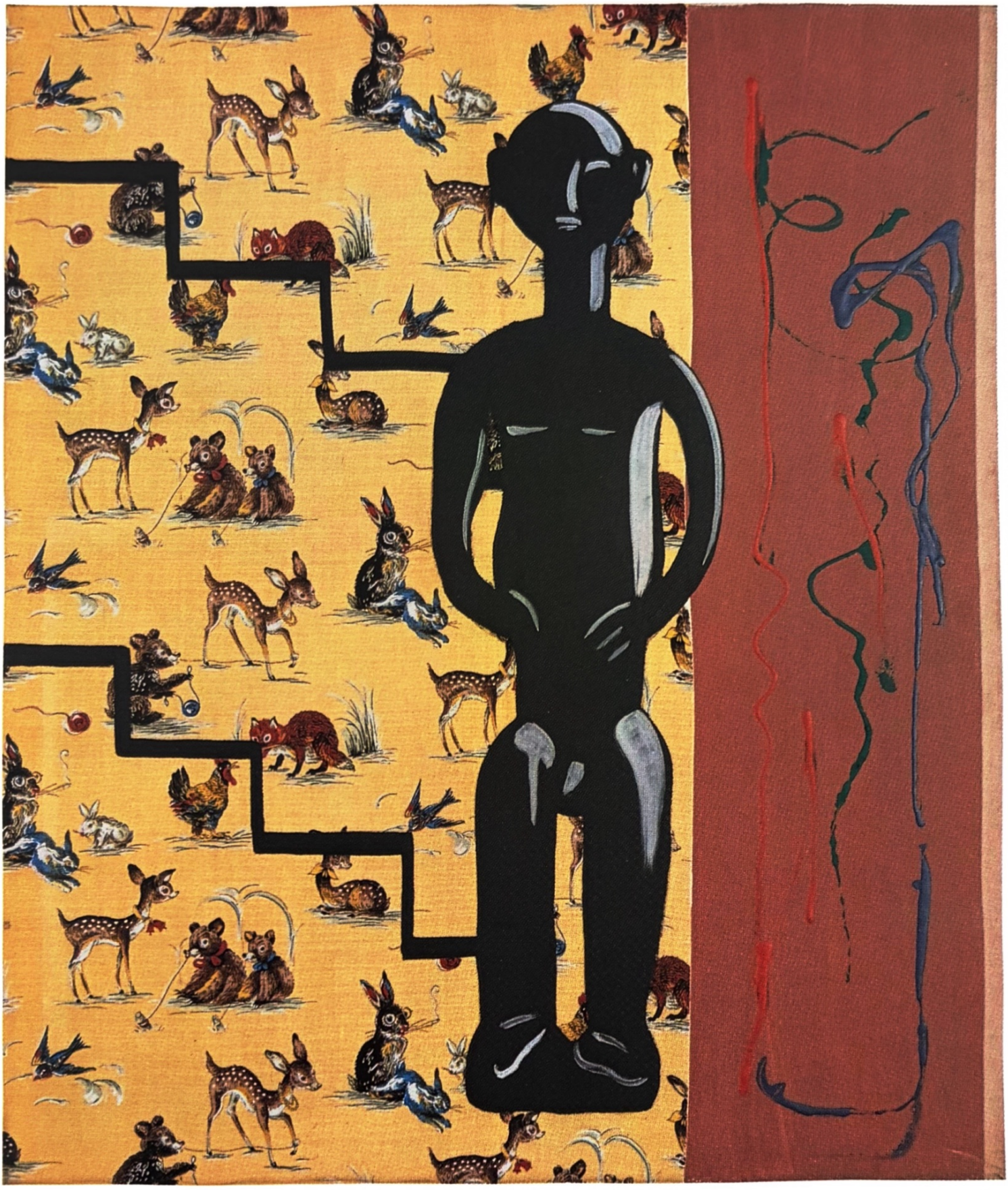
This brings us back to Janus, the god with two faces. Janus does not only reconcile the opposites that meet in the experiments with paints and tinctures. He also invariably mixes "the sanctified with the profane, the high with the low, the large with the tiny, the wise with the foolish."[156] And as such he enthrones a carnivalesque world where all existence is relative, and where change and transformation derive their strength from that ironic glance that takes in all things and only destroys in order to renew.

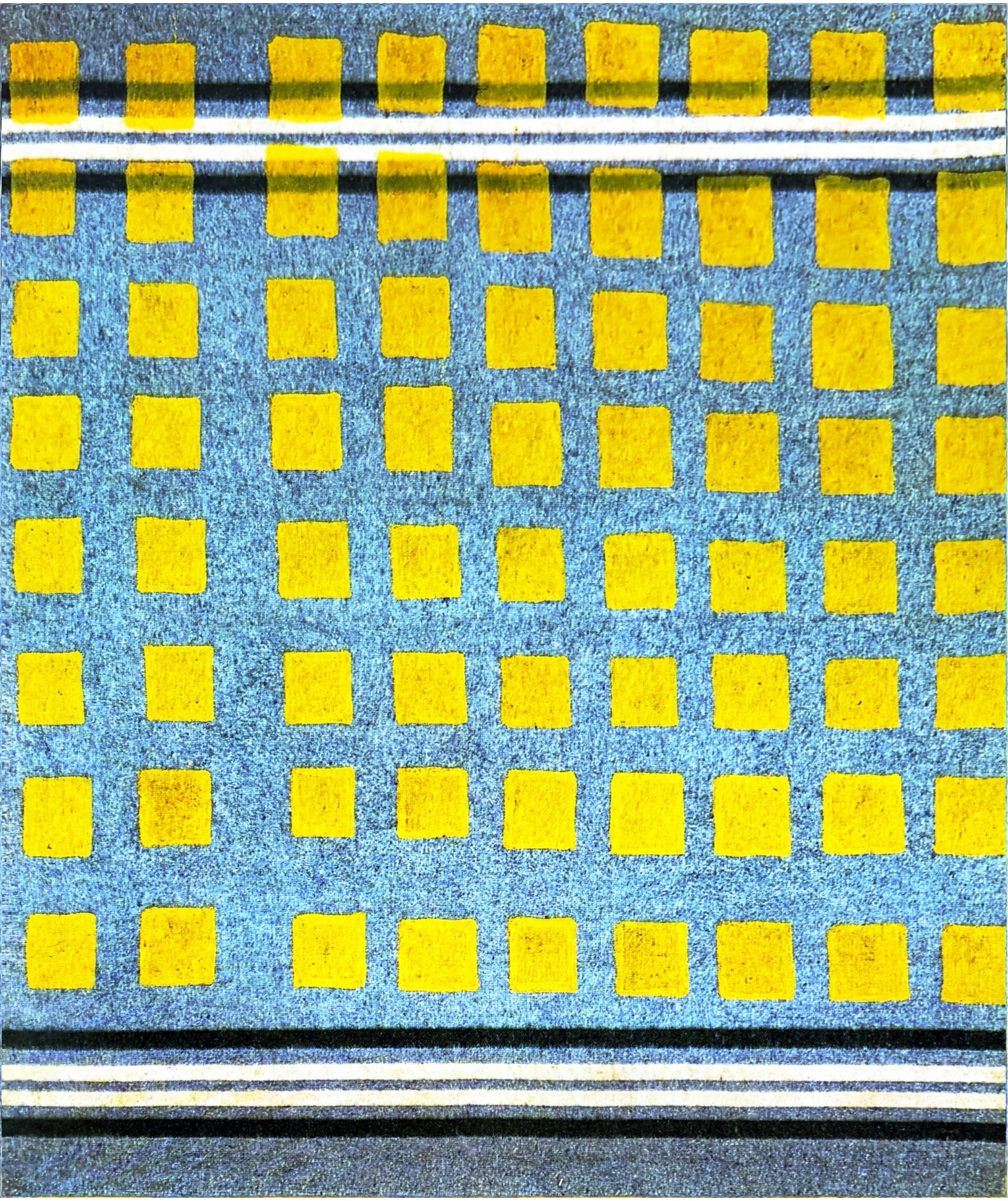
From the German by Fiona Elliott

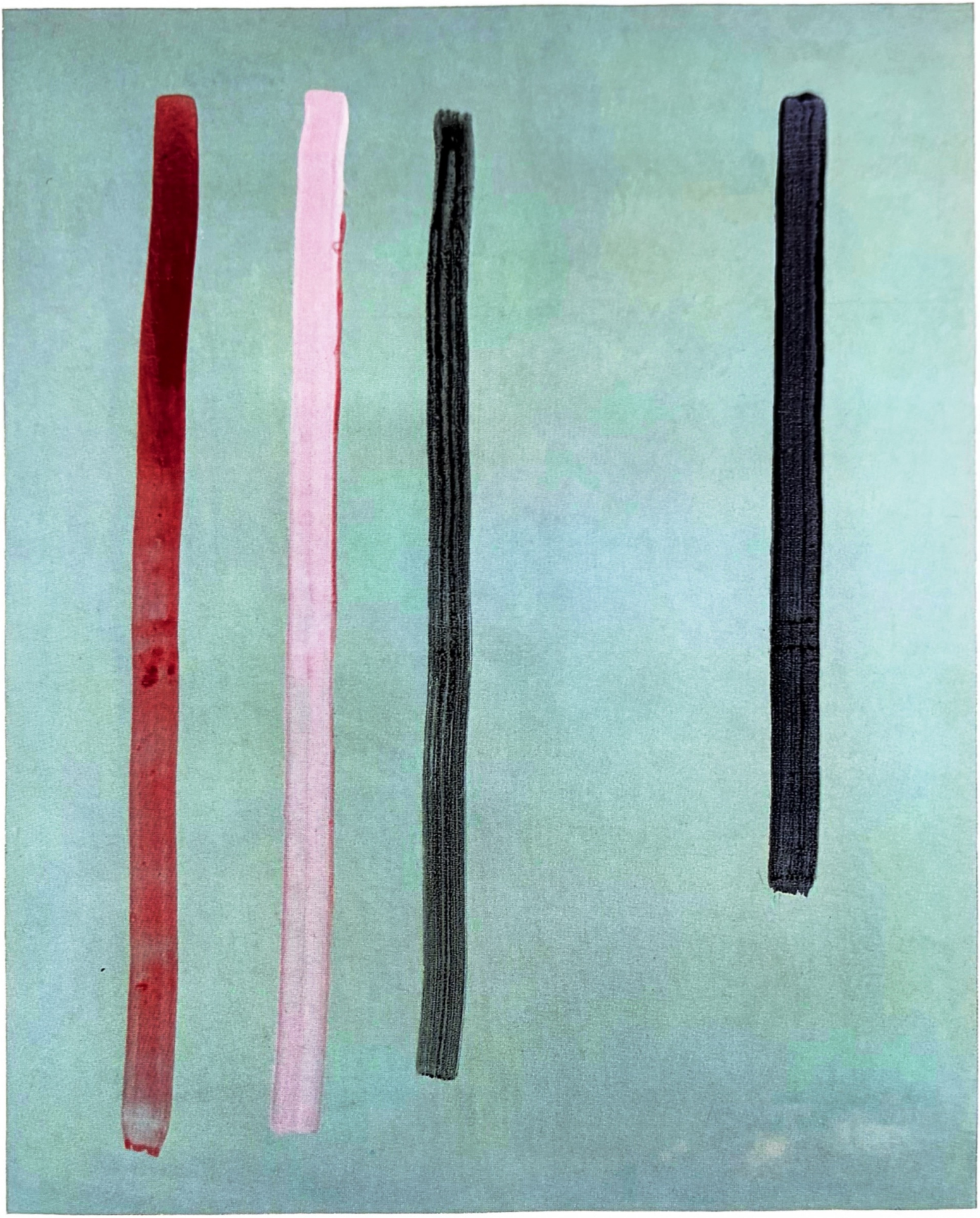
154 Quoted in Frank 1989, p. 270
155 Hülsmann 1966
156 Bakhtin 1969, p. 49



Das zehnte Foto, das in Pasadena aufgezeichnet wurde. Es zeigt die Mond-oberfläche am Landeplatz von „Surveyor-1". Der Stein im Bild links vorne ist 15,0 cm hoch und 30,8 cm lang. Die hellen Punkte sind Sonnenreflexe.







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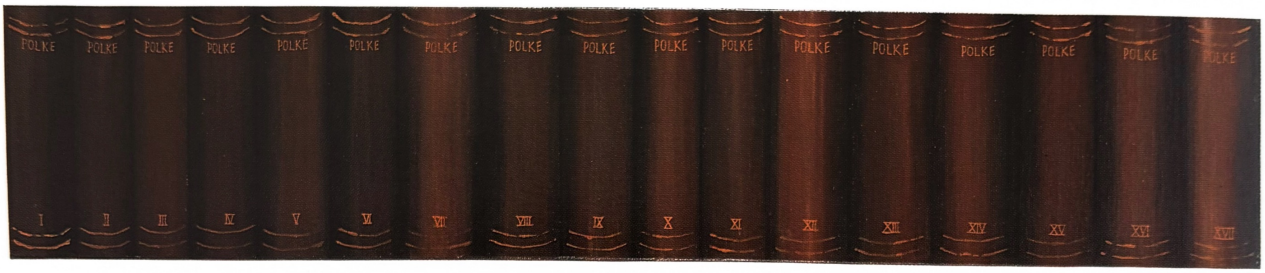
Moderne Kunst

Tibersprung II 1971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HANS BELTING

On Lies and Other Truths of Painting
Several Thoughts for S. P.

The Truth (in) of Painting

"Painting after painting" today makes use of the new freedom it has been given since all the futile obituaries. Many a misunderstanding about the limits and duties of painting have been settled and suddenly, painting again demonstrates what it can be, what it always has been – what it never has been even if it could have been. No longer has it to choose between art and the images bombarding our consciousness, between its own *truth of painting* and a different *truth in painting*. In the age of dogmatic Modernism these all seemed incompatible contradictions, like faith and error. The error of strict adherence to faith and an unwavering faith in the courage to err are now coming to light.

We have not yet entirely accustomed ourselves to a form of painting which is once again unashamedly painting and no longer succumbs to that programme which we usually rather thoughtlessly call ART. The "art of painting" had long been around when ART, in its abstract dignity, was still a long time in coming, which is why painting has returned at a time when ART is losing something of its monopoly. In art there can be no lies, only truth, which itself is fictitious – at least an uncertain idea. It would be a great reproach to speak of lies in ART, but in painting it is an accurate description.

Painting has beautiful, old lies at its command, if one may so refer to its tried and tested stage direction of our perceptions which we like a curious theatre audience await. We do not only perceive the world through painting. But in painting there is a dialogue between ourselves and the person pulling the strings behind our perception. This silent dialogue makes painting delightful and mysterious.

But what is painting? A coat of paint? Decoration? Representation? A creative gesture? A painted idea? A painted world? A painted painting? If it is the one, then it is also sometimes the other. Uncovering a lie in this labyrinth must simply mean finding an exit, fast, but then one is outside again [see p. 143]. To speak of lies where they are obvious becomes an act of truth (at least an act of perception). We perceive that we are taking part in the uncertain game of perception. Painting makes truths easier for us by clothing them in "transparent" lies. It uses lies which can express truths. By exposing its lies it reveals the truth of painting. It demands the return of what is already its own.

It is on this slippery surface that we confront the usual works we sometimes carelessly refer to as "pictures". A picture by Polke? What does that mean? We know of works by other painters which hermetically close themselves off from the world as if all they could do (or want to do) is demonstrate ART. By (temporarily) abstaining from this pathos, Polke brings forth new meaning. Derrida has reminded us of the wonderful old word *parergon* which derives from *ergon* (work) but is neither strictly speaking the work itself nor additional detail (*hors d'oeuvre*). According to him it "loosens all absolute values from their fixed positions without becoming indefinite." It is allowed to contain doubts which one day become certainties (e.g. lasting works) in which a side issue (attempt, experiment, parergon) is transformed into a central theme (work). Thus, like an open discourse, the parergon contains truths about painting concealed by the usual theoretical works.

So-called "classical Modernism" put itself in golden chains when it proclaimed the great truth of painting to distinguish it from pure illusion. When Cézanne wrote to Emile Bernard that he owed him "truth in painting" (the source for Derrida's title) he was speaking of the absolute truth in painting which he sought behind all representations. This was the arrival of ART. When Heidegger wrote his famous essay on art in 1935 he gave one chapter the title "Truth and Art". Although it contains a great deal about van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, Heidegger was not interested in painting (which for him was lacking) but in ART (preferably poetry). In an admittedly dark period, he ceremoniously announced the appearance of a "being", which could only be revealed through truth in art.

When Derrida subjected these religious theses to his non-religious deconstruction, he not only retrieved the "appearance" [*Schein*] from behind the "reality" [*Sein*] but put painting back into play, a concrete medium when compared with ART. However, Derrida's "truth in painting" is now the untruthful truth ordinarily displayed by texts. Painting returns not as a revelation of a higher truth but as a performance and a painted word game. Derrida also speaks of "four truths in painting" as if to herald the "three lies of painting" referred to in a title by Polke [see p. 140]. In his words "One dreams of painting without truth" apart from its own, giving it the right to go on being painted without shame. The "simulacra" it can conjure up so well are united with the "complete seriousness of their literal nature" at the other end of the scale (in other words: painting, nothing but painting). To continue to paint today means to continue writing a text (playing a game) which is different from subjecting oneself to linear progress [see p. 143].

A Negative Theology

It is not enough, however, to reduce painting to painting as if one knew everything about it. One would only commit a new error and explain a new ontology instead of ART. No, only when painting is questioned, when its obviousness and familiar surface are denied can one liberate the concept from too narrow an understanding. The